

# What Is Philosophical Counseling?

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## Maybe you've heard the phrase a couple of times...

Or maybe you haven't. That's okay, too.

"Philosophical counseling" might seem like a new invention. In a way, it is a "new approach to counseling" and is still in its pioneering stages.

Really, though, it's as old as philosophy itself. The ancient Greeks (Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, and the Epicureans) saw philosophy as an educational activity AND a kind of therapy for the soul — one that eased suffering, developed personal integrity, encouraged self-mastery, created justice, and cultivated the good life.

*I know you're here because you want to know more about philosophical counseling and how it can help you live a better life.*

So, allow me to give you an overview of this alternative to psychotherapy for working through life's problems.

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## Let's start here: Our ways of thinking influence almost everything we do.

They impact how we feel, what we desire, what we choose, how we act, and how we relate to others.

*When our lives are filled with problems, those problems are often rooted in how and what we THINK.*

But most of the time, we don't notice our thinking patterns. They run on auto-pilot, fueled by old habits and assumptions of which we remain unaware.

For instance, somewhere along the way, you may have picked up the belief that you are not "allowed" to pursue the career or lifestyle of your dreams. Mainstream notions of success have stamped themselves on your brain, and some voice inside you tells you that you'll just have to get comfortable in a cubicle, working yourself until you're ill so that you can buy a big house you'll rarely see.

Those "other" dreams — the ones filled with exploration, creativity, autonomy, and flexibility — are "not legit" or "not okay for a person like you."

You've never had the chance to question the voice making these judgments and demanding these things of you.

You haven't had the chance to examine whether the norms and values it expresses are healthy or toxic.

You've never tested whether its claims hold up under examination.

### **But that voice seems so powerful!**

It speaks with such authority!

Because of that, you've probably "decided" to be a "good girl" or "good boy" and do what it says, right?

And over time, it's led you to the conclusion that you're stuck in your current situation with no way out.

Things are the way they must be.

There's nothing you can do, even though you're miserable.

*And that right there has become your core belief.*

### **Now, you feel powerless.**

Isolated.

Depressed.

Your self-esteem is in the tank because you're not living the life that you want, and you're simultaneously failing to live up to other people's expectations of you.

You go through the motions all day, and when you come home, you're so exhausted that all you can do is escape into Netflix and cookie dough.

Your passions have withered. You've forgotten how to dream. You're overcome by emptiness.

*Alright, come back to me now...*

The point is: Our auto-pilot ways of thinking and judging ("there's nothing I can do," "I have to live in the way they tell me I should") can wreak havoc on our emotions, decisions, and actions in the world.

They can leave us feeling confused, alienated, worthless, defeated, aimless, and swimming in a sea of meaninglessness.

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### **If we could slow down and reflect on our ways of thinking...**

We might better grasp our view of the world and our role in it.

We might even have the chance to ask questions about it:

*What evidence is there for and against my way of seeing the world?*

*Do I really have no agency?*

*Am I obliged to agree with other people's judgments of success?*

*How does my way of seeing things serve me? How does it trip me up at times?*

*Can I really find personal fulfillment by pursuing someone else's aspirations?*

*Am I stunting my growth by believing I have no choices?*

*Are there alternative points of view I could or should consider?*

*Are there windows of freedom in my life that I haven't considered or taken advantage of?*

If we could slow down and examine our ways of thinking — our beliefs, assumptions, interpretations, judgments, and values — we might be able to cultivate greater clarity, breadth, and depth in our worldview, and adjust a few things that aren't working for us.

In other words, we might be able to dive deeper into wisdom about the world and ourselves and develop our understanding and self-understanding.

It all starts with "Know thyself," right?

"The unexamined life is not worth living," right?

That's our buddy Socrates talking. And ya know what? He was right.

We also might be able to create greater empowerment for ourselves.

You see, the work of examining our assumptions can have a big impact on our future actions, reactions, and general experience of life. If we can carefully revise our assumptions, we can apply our new insights to our actions in a way that allows us to live with greater intention, self-determination, and authenticity.

## **Philosophy is all about a regular practice of self-examination and deliberate action...**

Those two things make up the cornerstone of "the philosophical life," and (you guessed it) it's the very thing we pursue together in philosophical counseling.

*A regular practice of self-examination and deliberate action has the power to increase understanding, meaning, purpose, freedom, and fulfillment in our lives.*

Philosophical practice also has the power to transform many of the emotional culprits that cause us suffering: fear, dread, angst, anger, depression, excessive attachment, jealousy, resentment, low self-esteem, and guilt.

*When you think in new ways, you also start to feel in new ways, too... and the way you approach and experience the world begins to shift.*

You might be surprised how quickly some of your old feelings change when you have a new realization or try out a new perspective in philosophical counseling.

A new understanding of your situation can lead to a little more empowerment, a little more hope, a little more inspiration, a little more creativity, and a little more personal satisfaction. And you know what? You start to feel a little better—maybe even a LOT better.

Examining the thoughts behind the feelings paves the way for major life transformation and healing.

So, it turns out that philosophical counseling is a process that is *educative, empowering, AND therapeutic*. It's a triple threat!

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## **What do we do in philosophical counseling?**

In philosophical counseling, we embark on an inquiry into your life.

Definition time:

**Philosophical counseling is a collaborative and conversational activity in which you and a trained philosopher work through your life problems by identifying, examining, and revising the operating beliefs, values, and habits of action that inform those problems.**

Now that that's out of the way, I'd say that there are three main stages in philosophical counseling:

### **(1) Identifying your *implicit* "truths" and values and making them *explicit*.**

We all walk around with a variety of "truth claims" operating in the background of our minds. Bringing them forward and examining them improves self-awareness and puts you in a position to clarify and explore the fundamental principles guiding your life.

### **(2) Critically examining your core truths and values.**

Critical examination is your chance to analyze the reasons and evidence supporting your beliefs and to discover the strengths, weaknesses, benefits, and challenges associated with how you think.

One thing that will help us in the examination stage is to compare your beliefs with different wisdom traditions in the history of philosophy. Opening your mind to the diverse world of worldviews out there can be a transformative experience.

The examination stage is also an opportunity to become aware of any inconsistencies between your beliefs, or conflicts between your beliefs and your actions (what you say and what you do). These revelations will help you to see how you might be operating at cross-purposes with yourself (the old

“self-sabotage”).

### **(3) Creative re-building.**

As we consider an array of philosophical perspectives, your core truths and values will start to shift, expand, and sharpen.

In the creative re-building stage, you’ll get a chance to develop your own philosophy and apply your new insights to your life. That means you’ll get to experiment with putting new ideas into practice, and you’ll learn to direct your own actions with intentional choice.

Look at that! You’re already on to “living deliberately.”

In philosophical counseling, the three stages tend to move in a circular manner rather than a linear one. As new insights emerge, it can be valuable to circle back to earlier stages with new ideas for deeper examination.

### **The ultimate goal of philosophical counseling is to help you to...**

... conduct an inquiry into your own life,

... develop your own coherent, empowering, and fulfilling life philosophy,

... and put your philosophy into practice so you can *live* it!

At the very least, what you can expect to get out of philosophical counseling is greater self-knowledge and understanding of your problems. But stick with it, and you’ll become empowered to solve those problems, learn how to relieve suffering, and create greater fulfillment in your life.

*I’ve experienced it. I’ve seen it. And I know you have the power to transform your life, too!*

### **What exactly is the role of the philosophical counselor?**

Most importantly, a philosophical counselor listens carefully to you, works to understand your problems and operating worldview, and helps you to develop a coherent philosophy of life that will serve your well-being.

A philosophical counselor approaches you as a fully functioning individual with the courage to deal with the perplexities and struggles central to the human condition — like creating meaning, purpose, freedom, empowerment, integrity, and authenticity in your life.

A philosophical counselor works collaboratively with you to solve life problems by activating and cultivating the powers you already possess — like critical thinking, imagination, empathy, desire, self-discipline, choice, and creativity. Yep, you’ve already got a lot of the good stuff you need! We’ll just get those powers up and moving, give them a shot of espresso for the road, and put them to work.

A philosophical counselor is your navigation partner on your journey to gain awareness, find direction, create solutions, and develop a fulfilling life.

**And a couple of things a philosophical counselor DOESN'T do...**

A philosophical counselor does not tell you what to think or do. You're in charge of you. Instead, a philosophical counselor asks questions, uses tools of critical examination, offers fresh perspectives, draws connections, and gives encouragement.

A philosophical counselor does not diagnose or treat emotional or behavioral disorders. If problems arise of a medical nature, the philosophical counselor will help you seek an appropriate healthcare professional.

*I know that examining your life is deep, difficult work and takes courage. Once you get going, though, you may very well find it to be exhilarating.*

**What makes a philosopher a good counselor?**

Philosophers have training that makes them well-suited for the kind of collaborative dialogue-work described above.

It is probably well-known that philosophers have a knack for asking questions, clarifying ideas, challenging popular opinions, drawing connections, offering fresh perspectives, and getting involved in painstakingly careful inquiries into big questions.

*Philosophers possess other skills that are particularly useful in a one-on-one counseling relationship...*

Philosophers are trained to understand others' worldviews — to learn them inside and out, explain them, compare them, evaluate their strengths and weaknesses, analyze their benefits and challenges, and think through their practical implications.

Philosophers are also trained to listen carefully for an argument in what another person says. They know how to identify implicit assumptions, truth claims, and values. They know how to trace carefully others' lines of reasoning and ask the questions needed to examine them. And, philosophers are masters of recognizing and proposing solutions for faulty logic, fallacies, and contradictions.

Philosophers have experience with uncertainty and exploring uncharted territories of thinking without a map. They are accustomed to working without a formula and dealing creatively with open-ended questions.

Philosophers know how to inspire learning, activate others' inner philosopher (Socrates' gadfly effect), and empower people to think for themselves and choose reflectively.

Philosophers know how to learn from others, take what they say seriously, interpret their meaning, and engage in an ongoing practice of self-critique and revision of their own understanding, providing a helpful model to others on their own philosophical journey for the first time.

Philosophers know how to recognize relativism, nihilism, solipsism, and other “tail-spin” positions.

Philosophers have been trained in and can discuss a broad array of wisdom traditions (ancient and modern, Eastern and Western). They are also experts in a few of their favorite theories, which they have usually taught, debated publicly with other experts, and published after deep and thorough consideration.

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## **You might be wondering whether your problems are “philosophical.”**

Most of the time, we characterize our problems in terms of a particular relationship we’re struggling with, a big life change, or a feeling of sadness, loss, confusion, loneliness, frustration, powerlessness, burnout, or worry. But those problems are often signs of deeper philosophical issues we’re dealing with.

The first thing to know is that not all of life’s problems are medical. Not every instance of struggle, suffering, or unhappiness is a sign of a mental illness. It is sometimes appropriate to seek a healthcare professional with training in psychology to treat an emotional or behavioral disorder. A person may have a problem with their brain chemistry, in which case it’s appropriate to get the help of a psychiatrist who can prescribe medication.

But when problems are not medical, one needs a different kind of counsel.

**Everyday problems dealing with values, ethics, meaning, purpose, truth, certainty, justice, power, freedom, and happiness cannot be resolved with medical intervention. They are best approached through philosophical dialogue.**

*Some common philosophical problems include difficulties with...*

### **Core beliefs and truths...**

You might not be sure what you believe. You might not know what’s *worth* believing or how to figure that out. You might even be having a crisis of disillusionment, where everything you once believed looks like a lie, and now you’re staring into the void. A little unsettling, eh? I know.

### **Critical thinking...**

You might need some help questioning old assumptions and critically examining them. It can be hard even to recognize old assumptions that are completely ingrained in your life. You might need an outsider to point them out so you can discuss them.

### **Clear reasoning and consistency...**

When overwhelmed by fear, grief, or stress, it can be easy to think in binary “black and white” ways, catastrophize everything, draw outrageous conclusions, or get confused by inconsistent beliefs (which only compound all the stress). Some logical analysis can help you get back on track and calm down some of those feelings.

### **Creative thinking...**

Your thinking might be in a rut. Perhaps old habits have set in. Or maybe there are some rigid cultural norms you've inherited that you can't seem to shake. It might be time to try on some fresh perspectives and diversify your thinking. You're in luck because the history of philosophy is filled with different points of view that can open up your mind.

### **Meaning, purpose, and fulfillment...**

Not knowing what the point of your life is and losing your sense of meaning is one of the most common philosophical crises – an existential crisis. It tends to be at the root of many forms of depression and anxiety. Philosophers have an array of insights about sources of meaning that can help you explore your purpose.

### **Freedom, responsibility, and self-determination...**

Do you wonder how you can be more in charge of your actions, reactions, and direction in life? How can you seize your power to choose? How can you decide between various long-term goals and short-term possibilities? (Ah, the old fork in the road!). We often forget that we DO have choices to make, and we let old beliefs, habits, and inertia hold us back. Philosophers can help you explore ways of moving forward again.

### **Social power...**

When you feel powerless, it's probably not "all in your head." Something is likely going on in your social environment that's contributing to that feeling. It is likely not *just a feeling* but a "situation" in which you find yourself. What is there to understand here? What can you do about it? Social-political philosophers spend a lot of time analyzing how social power works, considering its effects, questioning what forms of power are legit versus unjust, and trying to figure out how to maintain your freedom and humanity in all of it. Philosophers can help you to figure out how to push back.

### **Ethics, values, justice...**

We all face questions about what we should care about most. What should come first in our lives? What are the highest values worth working for or even fighting for? We also all face questions about what it means to "do the right thing." How do we make sure that we treat others (and ourselves) fairly? What should our guiding principles be and why? What do we do when we're stuck in ethical dilemmas? What do we do when we're stuck in a situation of ethical corruption? What does integrity look like? Long traditions of ethics and moral philosophy propose a variety of answers. Learning a few frameworks can help you analyze and deal with these questions a lot better.

### **Change, loss, and death...**

"Why won't things stay the same?" "How do I cope with loss?" "How do I face the fact that I will not live forever?" These are three of the toughest issues that all humans have to face. (Damn human condition!) They cause a whole lot of anxiety for a whole lot of people. Philosophers are ready to talk about different ways to think about and cope with these issues.



### **Identity and authenticity...**

“Who am I, anyway?” “Who do I want to be?” Perhaps you once answered those questions, but your life turned upside down and you don’t know who you are anymore. Ah, an identity crisis! You’re not alone. “How do I live in a way that expresses my uniqueness?” “How do I live according to what I care about and not just what others expect of me?” Ah, a crisis of authenticity! You’re in good company again. We’re going to need some deep philosophical dialogue for these two.

### **Communication and conflict resolution...**

Why do we have so much trouble understanding each other? How might we get on the same page? How do we step toward each other when our views seem so polarized? How do we respect each other’s differences while also recognizing common interests and needs? Philosophers of language, communication, and conflict resolution can help. (A little secret: This is the area of philosophy I wrote about in my book, *Gadamer’s Ethics of Play: Hermeneutics and the Other*).

*If you find yourself in an infinite loop about these questions, you’re in the right place!*

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## **What’s the difference between philosophical dialogue and psychotherapy?**

In philosophical dialogue we take our time to slowly and thoroughly clarify the meaning of our terms, examine lines of reasoning with critical thinking, compare our thinking with other perspectives and worldviews, creatively open up new insights, and consider the relationship between our thoughts and our emotions, choices, and actions.

Unlike psychotherapy, philosophical dialogue is not diagnostic. A philosopher neither treats you as a patient nor assumes that there is a disorder or illness present in you (beyond the challenges with the human condition we all face). You are not a specimen to examine. What you say is not a sign of some pathology. You are a person to partner with in critical and creative thinking to figure out how to live a better life.

On that “not a specimen” point: A philosopher does not presume causal explanations for your behaviors, feelings, or thoughts. She does not view you as one who is “determined” to feel, act, or think in a certain way because of internal or external conditions. A philosopher assumes that with your human abilities to think and choose, you have the power to change your life. A philosophical counselor acts as your partner and collaborator in that process.

While psychotherapists tend to focus on the emotional and behavioral spheres of life, philosophers tend to focus on processes of thinking (the assumptions, judgments, interpretations, and values) that inform your feelings and actions. Philosophers are trained to notice the truth claims and value claims that are at work in what another person says, and to ask questions about them.

So, Whereas many psychotherapists approach your problems by asking about your feelings, tracing a personal history of trauma, and identifying childhood origins of current difficulties (a retrospective approach focused heavily on emotion); philosophical counselors tend to approach your problems by asking about *why* you feel the way you do, uncovering assumptions, tracing lines of reasoning with you,

examining thought patterns together, and opening up alternative perspectives for consideration. They then turn to helping you put new insights into practice and consider which choices you might make going forward for a more fulfilling life (a prospective approach that connects feeling, thinking, and choosing).

For many of my clients, this is a refreshing alternative to psychotherapy. We do not only talk about how you feel; we also question why you feel that way. And we ask deeper questions about what is true, what is good, and what is fair.

*As your thinking develops and transforms through philosophical counseling, so do your ways of feeling, choosing, acting, and living!*

### **A few other important things...**

Philosophers are ready to consider the big existential questions about meaning, purpose, identity, and authenticity with you, and ground those conversations in discussions about the human condition, or what it means to exist in this world as a being that's not an object. They are ready for questions like: What's the point of my life? Who am I anyway? Why am I here? How can I be true to myself?

Philosophers are also ready to consider questions of ethics and social power when helping you deal with life problems. They bring long traditions of wisdom in ethics and political philosophy to the table to help you examine your life situation, your possible choices, and their implications.

For instance, we talk about what it means to respect human beings and other creatures. We consider different ways of understanding the moral demands that weigh on you. And we discuss your values and principles of integrity so you might sharpen your personal ethical code.

We also consider the dynamics of social and political power you find yourself in. Many of the most difficult problems in life are not merely psychological or personal. As second-wave feminists taught us, "the personal is political." Big life-problems are very often manifestations of systemic injustices or toxic cultures that need reform. In other words, they are about problematic relations of social power.

Philosophical counselors consider how your personal history takes place within a wider context of social-political structures. There are times when your distress has much to do with the power relations in which you exist or the state of injustice in the world, and the remedy is less about turning inward and learning to adapt to that injustice, and more about learning how to engage politically and resist in active, creative, and fruitful ways that bring a greater sense of meaning, purpose, and agency to your life.

### **And finally...**

One thing that surprises many clients is that philosophical counseling is radically un-hierarchical. Your counselor is not your priest, doctor, or professor (even if she's a professor elsewhere in her life). S/he is your partner in navigating the difficulties of the human condition – all those big problems of meaning, purpose, values, integrity, identity, freedom, and authenticity.

The relationship between counselor and client aims to embody and preserve the ideals of a philosophical friendship, in which partners are respected in their individuality and autonomy while

striving for wisdom, freedom, and fulfillment in their lives. The relationship is an authentic, human-to-human engagement in life's big questions.

*Frankly, a human and humanizing relationship is hard to come by these days, and often it's its own remedy for everyday alienation.*

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### **In summary, philosophical counseling takes a holistic approach...**

... to the thinking-feeling-choosing-doing of the individual in a social-political world.

It considers the individual's powers of examination, creative exploration, and reflective choice as vehicles of movement, change, and growth. Although patterns of thinking can cause us problems, thinking itself is not considered a problem in philosophical counseling. It is harnessed as a wonderful tool and key ingredient for living with vision, intention, and deliberate choice.

Some psychotherapeutic methods resemble philosophical approaches, as their theoretical roots can be traced back to Socratic, Stoic, Buddhist, Existential, or Feminist philosophies, among others. But psychotherapists' and philosophers' training can be quite different, so they approach and focus on their clients' problems with different perspectives and tools.

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*A philosopher can make an excellent co-traveler on your journey into life's big questions, offering you a unique inquiry-experience that opens up distinct dimensions of thought and choice that complement and move beyond other forms of "talk therapy."*