

Not Just A Chemical Imbalance

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Which of the following is true?

- a. "I have a chemical imbalance."
- b. "I need to talk about my problems."
- c. Both of the above

Are you depressed? Consistently anxious? Do you suffer from bipolar disorder? ADHD? Do you experience obsessions and/or compulsions? Are the aftereffects of trauma disrupting your life? Are you addicted to alcohol, drugs or unproductive behaviors? If any of these is true, you do have "a chemical imbalance"-your brain is not working as well as it might. And you "need to talk about it."

I tell my clients who suffer from the listed conditions that the problem is biological-each condition is related to the structure and functioning of your brain. And each is "psychological," with impacts on your thoughts, feelings, behavior and relationships. For some conditions, like bipolar disorder or very severe depression, I insist that the client also be in treatment with a physician (usually a psychiatrist) who can prescribe medication. For other conditions, we may try counseling on its own, knowing that medication can be added later as needed. Yes, it's biological, but brain function can also be addressed with "informational inputs"-by, say, talking about thoughts and feelings, where they come from and how to manage them. Behaviors like meditation and exercise can also help to make positive changes in brain functioning.

For an example of how both medication and counseling might be needed, suppose that you are severely depressed, and that you have a family history of depression. Without knowing any more than this, I would guess that your genes are making a major contribution to your depression, so your condition is brain-based (the "chemical imbalance"). I would probably encourage you to address the depression with medication. However, medication alone is likely not to make you stop feeling depressed. Especially if you have been depressed over a long period of time, you probably have depressed feelings, like hopelessness, that have gotten to be a habit. Your patterns of interaction with other people are likely to be colored by irritability, or guilt, or lack of energy, or inability to experience pleasure, and this is very hard on your relationships. You may even become so isolated socially that you don't want to leave home, or you may begin to think you don't deserve anything good or pleasurable. Thoughts, feelings, behaviors and relationships are what we work on in counseling-understanding and addressing the sources and effects of your depression.

Depression is just one example. People with anxiety and trauma history often develop habits of avoidance, making it difficult to do what they need to do, like go to work or

even out of their houses. People with bipolar disorder may find it difficult to maintain consistency over time in their relationships, jobs, or self-care. People with obsessions or compulsions experience thoughts and behaviors that disrupt their normal functioning, again with unfortunate effects on their lives. People recovering from addictions may find it hard to tolerate feelings they escaped by practicing their addiction.

Problematic patterns of feelings, thoughts and behavior are what we deal with in counseling. For some conditions, treatment with medication as well as counseling is essential; for other conditions, counseling alone is most effective for long-term relief of symptoms; and for still others, a combination of counseling and medication is optimal. At Pastoral Counseling of Northern Virginia, we collaborate with you to determine what treatment strategy is likely to be most helpful for you and your own situation. You can reach any of us at (703) 449-1944. My voice mail extension is 220.

Anne Martin, Ph.D. is a clinical psychologist who has a strong interest in how brains work, and an even stronger interest in working in relationship with clients to help overcome obstacles to a full, productive, and satisfying life that includes the capacity to give and receive love. She provides psychotherapy to people who suffer from mental and emotional disorders, as well as people having problems with jobs, school and relationships. She can be reached at (703) 449-1944 x220.

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