



Samaritan Counseling Center staff includes (from left) Executive Dir. Rev. Jeanne Hanson, Clinical Dir. Scott Campbell, and Board Chairwoman Rev. Zina Jacque.

Making Positive Changes in Your Life

SAMARITAN'S REV. JEANNE HANSON TALKS ABOUT CLIENT CENTERED COUNSELING

THE SAMARITAN COUNSELING CENTER celebrates its 10-year anniversary this year. In the six and a half years since Rev. Jeanne Hanson has been its executive director, they've seen a tremendous increase in the number of people seeking counseling, especially young people. Education through local counseling centers, hospitals, nonprofits like the National Alliance on Mental Illness, and social media have helped reduce the stigma around mental health, increased awareness about suicide prevention, and promoted resources for help.

Even with this added knowledge, there can be apprehension the first time we do anything new, especially when it involves telling personal information to a stranger. We asked Rev. Jeanne Hanson to talk about the process involved in seeking counseling to help encourage readers to get help for themselves or someone they love if it is needed.

QB: *What happens the first time someone seeks counseling at Samaritan?*

JH: When clients call Samaritan, they talk with our intake coordinator, Brian McCallum, who spends time matching the needs of the caller with the skills and specialties of our counselors. This leads to good matches most of the time. The first appointment is called an intake, and it's unlike any other session, so don't judge counseling on the first session. At intake, there are some forms to go over for insurance and administration purposes, and questions to answer for the counselor to gain insight and understanding about the issues at hand. Sometimes it takes a few appointments for the client to connect with the counselor, and for the counselor to get a full sense of the scope and the goals for therapy. If, after three sessions, the rapport is not there, clients need not feel uncomfortable about making a change. It's discouraging when people muster the courage and motivation to go to counseling only to quit because the fit wasn't right.

QB: *Why do most people seek counseling?*

JH: The main reason is because something is going on and they know that they need support to cope with or change something. When we're in pain because something in us is breaking, or has broken, and reach out for help, there's real motivation. And calling for help means that there's an element of hope that things won't always feel this way, and that it can get better. We want to get better, stronger, wiser, and calmer so we can live a happier life. This hopeful attitude is the most conducive for success, because they're willing to be vulnerable, honest, and explore the inner landscape to find the old triggers. No matter what brings people into counseling, success is always possible.

QB: *How long does it take to see progress?*

JH: Sometimes it takes people a few sessions to get past the barriers they've built because of deep pain that needs to be processed, or anger to be vented, and trust must be established before someone can truly open up and feel completely safe in sharing their story. Trust is so important in counseling, so if someone has been betrayed in the past, it can take a few sessions for both client and counselor to feel a good connection. Once established, they're partners in an amazing journey of transformation and healing.

QB: *What can clients expect from their counselor?*

JH: First, that they're in a safe place where their issues and behaviors are not judged, and second, that the counselors are there to help them achieve whatever goal they came in for, whether it's working through grief, reducing anxiety or depression, saving a relationship, figuring out how to deal with their teen, or how a teen can deal with their parents. The goals of the client become the goals of the therapist through a collaboratively-created, unique treatment plan.

QB: *What does the treatment plan accomplish?*

JH: The treatment plan is simply what type of techniques and skills the client would like to learn, a general timeline, measurements of progress through feedback and assessments, and some type of between-sessions work so that the client is completely empowered to build on what was done in session. From the very first meeting, counselors

listen carefully, watch body language, and seek to understand the whole person, not just the problem that brought them in the door. The progress and transformation that takes place is because the person who came in for help works hard toward their goals for feeling healthier, happier, and being able to carry on with confidence. The counselor is there to provide support, information, education and skills, professional feedback, positive reinforcement, and accountability. The client is the one who does the hard work of shifting perspectives, changing behaviors, or accepting and coping with a new normal.

QB: *Does everyone who comes in for counseling achieve their goals?*

JH: Most do, which is a testament to human resilience. The journey to wholeness is a life-long process, because we deal with new challenges all the time. Counseling provides the tools to cope with, and overcome them in a healthy, authentic way. The measurements are always looking at progress, not perfection. Obviously, there are two people involved in the success of therapy; the counselor and the client. On the client's part, motivation and hope are foundational to success, so a client's state of mind when they arrive is key.

QB: *What if you are in counseling, but didn't seek it on your own?*

JH: Some people just aren't open to therapy. Maybe they're being dragged in by a parent, a partner, a child, the courts, a boss, or perhaps a good friend. They don't want to be there, and they resist the possibility of change. Perhaps they don't think that counseling can help, or they're afraid of what might happen if they dig into their feelings. These folks often sabotage their mental, emotional, or physical health, mostly because of old patterns or habits created as a way of coping, and the thought of changing those patterns is scary. Counselors can only offer the tools, they can't make someone use them, but even planting the seeds and teaching the tools can have a positive outcome, months or years later.

QB: *What about the desire to change someone else?*

JH: Another reason people come in is that they

want to fix the people around them. Perhaps they're in a bad relationship or a bad situation at work, or they've had a long-standing feud with a child or sibling and they want to figure out how to get the other person to change. They may resist the idea of working on skills for themselves, like shifting from a reactive mode to a responsive mode, communicating non-defensively, establishing healthy boundaries, and forgiveness. These folks often shift over time when they realize that the only person we can change is ourselves, and amazingly, that changes everything around us.

QB: *You mentioned transformation. What is it that really changes with counseling? Is it more than just the person's attitude?*

JH: Great question. Changes can take place at every level—behavioral, social, emotional, mental, relational, and even physical. Changing one's attitude about a situation can be a huge shift in how they address the issue, so that alone is a big victory. We also know that simple behavior changes like healthy eating and getting enough sleep can produce incredible results. And what scientists and researchers are discovering every day is that good counseling provides powerful tools to not only change the way people behave and interact, but it can change the shape of the brain and responses of the body.

For example, mindfulness is an effective technique to help us be present in the moment. It's effective for reducing stress, anger, and self-judgment, and in increasing impulse control and concentration, in eliminating insomnia and headaches, and even in lowering cholesterol and blood pressure. For those who meditate or pray, studies at Duke, Harvard, and others have shown that any practice that quiets the mind and connects to a deeper place within can increase the thickness of the frontal lobe of the brain which is responsible for things like empathy, executive function, memory, problem solving, and reactivity, among other things. The frontal lobe doesn't fully develop until our mid-20s, and we can continue to strengthen this important part of our brains all of our lives. Just as a treadmill or exercise bike is good for our muscles, mindfulness, meditation, prayer, or other spiritual practice is good for our brains.



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QB: What other discoveries are there with the brain?


JH: It used to be that if someone had a stroke or a brain injury and lost function, there wasn't much done for recovery. But we're constantly learning more about how the brain functions, and now we know that the brain can form new neural-pathways and relearn how to walk, talk, move, and think with the undamaged parts of the brain. This wonderful plasticity can even switch genes on and off. The brain is a pharmacy for chemicals that control our nervous system, endocrine system, digestion, and immune system. It can whip up happiness chemicals like oxytocin, serotonin, dopamine, and endorphins, as well as stress chemicals like cortisol and adrenaline. These get ordered, so to speak, by our thoughts that send signals to our brains to release these various concoctions. The good news is that we can learn skills and habits that can regulate these neurotransmitters through awareness of what thoughts trigger what responses. It's always easier said than done, however, and just like any other organ, our brain sometimes doesn't function well and may require medication to get or stay healthy. It's important to realize that anti-depression or anti-anxiety drugs can make a huge difference in jump-starting or maintaining good brain chemistry. Samaritan's psychiatrist works closely with our counselors when medication is required.

QB: How long does it usually take for someone to reach their goals with counseling?

JH: That's another great question, and probably the hardest to answer, because it depends on the circumstances that brought someone in, and if they're truly invested in getting better, as we talked about earlier. Unlike a broken bone, there's no standard time for someone to heal from the grief of a broken heart, or the pain of broken trust. Those who have been fortunate to have loving, supportive parents will usually have an easier time overcoming difficult events or changing circumstances than someone who had a traumatic or abusive upbringing. If someone is recovering from bi-polar disorder, they will usually come in every week for a few months, then less often for periodic check-ins. Relationship issues can often lead to individual, separate sessions to work out underlying mental illness like depression or narcissism. Our average length of therapy is 12 weeks, but the median is about 6 months. The key to success is based on the trust and relationship established between counselor and client, because the counselor is there to help move emotional obstacles and journey with the client through the loss, shame, pain, heart-ache, confusion, and all the rest, to give people skills with confidence, courage, and freedom to live fully and joyfully.

QB: Ten years is a great milestone. What do you see for Samaritan's future?

JH: We are looking to expand our educational offerings with Mental Health First Aid classes, QPR (suicide prevention) workshops, and psycho-educational groups into the community through

the churches, schools, and community groups. We're also looking into tele-counseling. Our psychiatrist, Dr. Singer, is already providing tele-psychiatry for many patients, so expanding that into our counseling services is a natural fit. People are accepting mental health as simply a part of their overall health, so we hope to continue to grow to meet the needs of the community. 

Ten Year Anniversary Gala on June 9

Samaritan will celebrate its 10th anniversary with a gala on June 9 at Biltmore Country Club. Tickets are \$150 for dinner, open bar, music, great raffles, fun auction items, and a night of supporting a fantastic cause. The auxiliary, Tiffany Andreae, Liisa Gent, Sarah Cuthbertson, and Rachel Kuna, have an incredible night planned for gala guests.

The mission of providing hope, help, and healing through professional counseling and psychiatry has motivated Samaritan Counseling Center since 2008. Samaritan's clients range in age from 3 to 98, and are helped by 13 seasoned, compassionate, licensed providers. Samaritan provides financial assistance for those who cannot afford counseling. Samaritan Counseling Center is located at 1000 Hart Road, Suite 201, in Barrington. To learn more, call 847-382-4673 or visit www.sccnw.org.