



# BECOMING A COUNSELING ADVOCATE

## (Orientation Manual)

*Presentation By:*  
**Brad Hambrick, M.Div., Th.M.**  
*Pastor of Counseling, The Summit Church*

\* **Instruction for Use:** For this material to be used effectively three steps need to be taken.

1. The **counselor** needs to read this packet and be familiar with the role of an advocate.
2. The **counselee** needs to read this packet and be familiar with the role he/she is asking a friend to fill.
3. The **potential advocate** needs to read this packet and agree to fill the role that makes an advocate beneficial to the counseling process.

Note: *This packet is written with the potential advocate as the primary audience.*

A video of this packet being taught can be found at [bradhambrick.com/advocate](http://bradhambrick.com/advocate).

Friend,

Thank you for your interest in being a counseling advocate. It may be that you are unfamiliar with what this role entails; therefore, our first task is to define the role. A counseling advocate is:

- A **peer-based** relationship (i.e., friend, mentor, accountability partner, encourager, etc.)...
- ... who serves as a **periodic guest** in counseling...
- ... providing **support and reinforcement** to formal counseling, and...
- ... serving as a long-term **encouragement and accountability**.

Let's take a moment and define each of these key phrases.

- **Peer-Based** – This means you don't need a degree or certificate in counseling to be an advocate. Your role is best captured in the phrase "*intentional, informed friend.*" This orientation and the advisement you receive from your friend's counselor are adequate for the role you're being asked to fill.
- **Periodic Guest** – You are not being asked to attend every counseling session. Based on your schedule and your friend's counselor's assessment of what would be most beneficial, a determination will be made about how often you need to attend counseling.
- **Support and Reinforcement (Short Term)** – During active counseling your role is to help your friend remember and enact the advisements made in counseling. Significant change is always made easier by the support of a good friend; however, too often counseling is attempted in isolation.
- **Encouragement and Accountability (Long Term)** – After counseling concludes your friend may not see their counselor again. But it is likely that the same perspective and advice from counseling will be needed from time-to-time. As a friend, you can provide ongoing encouragement and accountability.

A counseling advocate embodies **Galatians 6:2**, "*Bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ.*" Counseling can provide guidance during a hard season, but only friends-mentors within a church can ultimately fulfill Galatians 6:2. Thank you, again, for being willing to be the Body of Christ for your friend.

**Note:** While this resource packet was developed specifically for the counseling ministries of The Summit Church ([www.summitrdu.com/counseling](http://www.summitrdu.com/counseling)), we are delighted for any counselor – ministry based or mental health professional – to use this material. The paperwork provided within this packet provides an example of the type of release of information needed to make this possible within a professional counselor's confidentiality policies.

However, if you [counselee] would like to involve an advocate and your counselor is not the one introducing this possibility, please give this packet to your counselor and ask if they would be willing to utilize an advocate. It is ineffective and inappropriate to try to introduce an advocate to counseling without the counselor's awareness and consent.

The remainder of this packet will seek to answer the following questions:

1. What are the characteristics of a good advocate?
2. What should an advocate do when attending a counseling session?
3. What should an advocate do between counseling sessions?
4. What should an advocate do when counseling has concluded?
5. What paperwork needs to be signed for an advocate to participate in counseling and what does it mean?
6. What additional training is advised for an advocate?

## I. CHARACTERISTICS OF AN ADVOCATE

An advocate is usually someone with whom the counselee has a pre-existing relationship. The trust and awareness that develops in a tenured friendship is a major asset for at least two reasons: (1) your friend will not have to tell you their full life story because you already know much of it, and (2) having a struggle known by a tenured friend has a significant destigmatizing influence on our struggles. Here are four characteristics of a good advocate:

- **Mature** – Maturity can be defined as “common sense with Christ-like character and a track record of making wise choices.” Maturity is not perfection. But an advocate should demonstrate a life marked by good judgement and healthy relationships. Many of the conversations an advocate will have fit in the *wisdom category* rather than *ethics or morality*; therefore, an advocate needs to be able to discern “good” from “better” and “helpful” from “unhelpful” as much as “right” from “wrong.”
- **Trusted** – An advocate will need to be given relational-permission to say important things in emotionally uncomfortable moments. This means the counselee must trust their advocate. Change is hard and the pivotal moments when habits of thought, emotion, or behavior are being redirected can be tense. When a friend invites you to be an advocate they are saying, “I trust you enough to allow you to remind me of important things in moments of change even if I don’t like what you’re saying at the moment.” It is recommended that an advocate be (a) same-gendered and (b) non-family in order to protect the trust in the advocate relationship.
- **Accessible** – One of the primary advantages that an advocate provides is the accessibility of a friend. At most, counselors are usually available for one hour per week. Much can be done in an hour, but we all need more than an hour of being known, encouraged, and challenged each week. An advocate is a touch point that helps bridge the 167 hour gap between counseling appointments.
- **Honest** – An advocate is most needed when someone is prone to not be honest with him/herself. That is why an advocate must have the fortitude to be honest even if the truth is unwelcomed by their friend. Honesty is best given with tact – that is, “spoken in love” with the best interest of the other in mind (Eph. 4:15) – but tact cannot be mistaken for timidity that avoids speaking beneficial words.

## 2. ROLE DURING A COUNSELING SESSION

Again, an advocate does not have to be present for every counseling session. When you are present your role is to help the advisements and perspectives of counseling transition from the counseling office to day-to-day life. This likely means that each time you are present for a session, that session will devote a significant portion of time to reviewing and consolidating the work done in previous sessions. During a session there are four primary tasks you should focus on.

- **Listen** – As you listen, you should ask yourself, “Has my friend represented him/herself accurately to the counselor? Does the counselor know my friend well, and how could I help the counselor know them better? Are there key events or people left out of the counseling conversation? Are there aspects of my friend’s struggle that have not been a part of the conversation?” The counselor does not have the day-to-day awareness of your friend to answer these questions, and your friend may not have the objectivity to answer these questions. Listening also gives you better understanding about how your friend is processing their world. Listen to learn more about your friend. Be a student of her when she speaks.
- **Take Notes** – Note taking is beneficial.<sup>1</sup> Many times your friend, the counselee, is exposed to new teaching and insights in the midst of what can be an emotional conversation. Not only is the new information hard to recall in its entirety, but with the distraction of heavy emotions, it can be very difficult for your friend to remember everything discussed. Therefore, your notes serve as a reminder and relieve your friend from having to take notes so that they are more free to dialogue with the counselor.
- **Ask Questions** – Some of your questions will simply be reflective questions (i.e., asking the counselor, “Would I be saying the same thing you [counselor] are saying if I said [reframe key point in your words]?”). This ensures your reinforcement of counseling is contributing to the same goal. Other questions will be things your friend mentioned to you in casual conversation that they forgot to ask in counseling. You might also ask about factors in your friend’s life that have not been discussed and how they might influence your friend’s struggle.

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<sup>1</sup> Some counselors may not allow note taking in session and request that you write up any summary that would be helpful after the session, outside the counseling office. This should be clarified with the counselor during the initial session in which the advocate is a guest.

- **Provide Perspective** – As a friend you bring a perspective that neither the counselee nor the counselor have. Your friend lives their life, so they can't observe their life. You bring an objectivity that the counselor can't have. The counselor only knows the experience of your friend they have in the counseling office. Your perspective can help create a more three-dimensional picture of your friend's life and struggle for the counselor.

### 3. ROLE BETWEEN COUNSELING SESSIONS

Between sessions you are the same person you have been previously, just with greater intentionality. An advocate is not an "undercover lay counselor." You are a friend who becomes more purposeful in some interactions (not all... still do the kinds of things you normally enjoyed with your friend). This intentionality should take at least three forms and not take a fourth form.

- **Pray** – Being present in one or more counseling sessions will allow you to pray more intelligently for your friend. You will get to know their struggles and growth points better. As you get to know what your friend is working on in counseling, let them know you are praying for them at key junctures that are important to their progress.
- **Encourage** – Counseling may be the hardest thing that people try to do on their own. Let your friend know you admire their courage. If there are ways you can be involved in accomplishing a counseling goal, offer your assistance. In summary, make sure your friend knows they are not alone on this journey.
- **Remind** – Moments of change tend to be times when we get caught up in the momentum of habits or distracted by competing interests. This is why the second most repeated command in Scripture – behind only "fear not" – is "remember." God knows how much we need to be reminded, because God implores us to remember the basics of faith, hope, and trust throughout the Bible. You get to be this voice for your friend.
- **(Not) Report to Counselor** – Both your friend and your counselor need to know when, about what, and how communication will happen between you and the counselor. This should be discussed at the first meeting you attend. The release of information included with this packet is your friend's permission to include you in their counseling. Unless the counselor advises otherwise, it is the recommendation of this packet that communication between the counselor and advocate only occur in the presence of the counselee/friend.

### 4. ROLE AFTER COUNSELING CONCLUDES

If we use the metaphor of dieting, we all know that maintaining progress is as important as any other part of the change process. There is a sense of shame and failure when progress made regresses. Yet in counseling without an advocate, the counselee goes from supported to isolated when counseling concludes. The advocate model allows a key member of the helping team to remain present when formal counseling concludes.

- **"Between Counseling Continued"** – The same points about prayer, encouragement, and reminding (from the section above) could be repeated here. Everything said there remains relevant when counseling concludes.
- **Monitor Balance** – When we've devoted time to working on one thing (that is what we do in counseling), other things often get neglected. When we finish the first thing, we often feel like we have to "catch up"; that is a catch phrase which often means "get out of balance." This is why one of the most vulnerable times in life is immediately after completing a significant goal. Helping your friend assess the balance of their life after counseling concludes is an important way an advocate can be helpful.
- **Befriend** – Healthy fun is therapeutically beneficial. Having a friend and who enjoys doing things with you is life giving. Continue these interactions; which were the qualities that merited you being an advocate in the first place.

### 5. PAPERWORK AND EXPLANATION

The "Release of Information" below is worded and designed for Summit counseling ministries. However, any counselor should be able to make a comparable set of forms for their practice/ministry. Each counselor will want to make their own form using the letterhead of their ministry or counseling center.



It is normal for legal documents like this to make people nervous. When information is disclosed from a formal helping relationship this kind of documentation is needed. Let's look at the key elements of this release of information, so that you can be more comfortable with what it says and your role.

Note: Each portion of this sample document may be worded differently based on the needs of your friend and the style or context of the counselor. This section is merely meant to help you understand the key elements of a release of information.

- **People Involved** – the first thing a release of information must do is define the people involved; whose information will be shared (counselee), who will share the information (counselor), and who will receive the information (you).
  - Counselee Name: Your friend is the one who is granting permission for these conversations to occur; hence they are also the one required to sign the document.
  - Counselor Name: This tells you who you will be speaking with. If any communication is needed outside of an actual counseling session, this is the only person from the counseling ministry you should speak with.
  - Your Name: This tells the counselor who they have permission to speak with and include in sessions.
- **Type of Disclosure** – A release of information is not an “about anything” document. This section defines the types of information that you will have access to. The counselor will work with your friend to define the extent and nature of information disclosed prior to your presence, as an advocate, in a session. It may look different than the sample on the previous page.
- **Purpose of Disclosure** – A release of information is a purposeful document. This section explains “why” the content above is beneficial for you to know or have access to. The counselor and your friend will also define this section prior to you be present for a session.
- **Liability Clause** – Clarifying that this document removes liability is the legal protection purpose of this kind of document.
- **Duration of Release** – This release of information is written to be valid for as long as your friend remains in counseling with the counselor by whom the release is made.

## 6. ADDITIONAL TRAINING FOR AN ADVOCATE

This packet is meant to orient you to your role as an advocate. It is likely that your friend's counselor may recommend beneficial resources related specifically to your friend's struggles. Below are a few resource recommendations that may be a helpful supplement to your role as an advocate.

- [Side by Side](#) by Ed Welch. This is a brief book (176 pages) on how to be an intentionally helpful friend.
- [Instruments in the Redeemer's Hand](#) by Paul Tripp. This is longer book (376 pages) on how we can be “people in need of change helping people in need of change.”
- [In Our Lives First](#) by Diane Langberg. This is a six week devotional (160 pages) written for counselors about how helping others through hard times effects the soul of the counselor/helper.
- If you are concerned that your “helping” may become “enabling” consider [bradhambrick.com/10keyshelping](http://bradhambrick.com/10keyshelping)
- If you are looking for subject specific resources, there is a topical index at [bradhambrick.com](http://bradhambrick.com)
- If any additional resources added to this list, those updates can always be found at [bradhambrick.com/advocate](http://bradhambrick.com/advocate)

**Thank you again for your willingness to serve as an advocate. Proverbs 17:17 teaches us that truly special friends are those that are willing to persevere with us in the midst of difficult life struggles. Your willingness to be this kind of friend speaks volumes of you. We pray that this orientation packet helps you become more of the “intentional, informed friend” that you want to be.**