

How to Find a Therapist

Finding the right therapist takes research, patience, and intuition.

When you need and want to find a therapist --for you, your relationship, and your child-- it is because some part of your life is in turmoil. At those times, the responsibility of finding the right person to help can be overwhelming.

There are PhDs, PsyDs, MDs, MSs, MAs and MSWs. They come with different titles and responsibilities. What is the difference among a psychiatrist, psychologist, marriage & family therapist, family counselor, licensed professional counselor, social worker? Who is better prepared for your needs. Who prescribes medications? What are the costs? All these therapists provide mental health services. But each brings different training, experience, insights, and character to the table. It has been said that finding a good therapist is like finding gold bars. A good therapist is non-judging, accepts the patients as they present themselves, and they are tolerant and meet the progress speed of the patient.

Understanding your choices of professional helper:

Psychiatrists: These are doctors who specialize in the diagnosis and treatment of mental or psychiatric illnesses. They have medical training and are licensed to prescribe drugs. They are also trained in psychotherapy, or "talk" therapy, which aims to change a person's behaviors or thought patterns.

Psychologists: These are doctoral degree (PhD or PsyD) experts in psychology. They study the human mind and human behavior and are also trained in counseling, psychotherapy, and psychological testing which can help uncover emotional problems you may not realize you have.

Cognitive behavioral therapy is the psychologist's main treatment tool to help people identify and change inaccurate perceptions that they may have of themselves and the world around them. Psychologists are not licensed to prescribe medications. However, they can refer you to a psychiatrist if necessary.

Social Workers: These are specialists who usually provide social services in health-related settings. Their goal is to enhance and maintain a person's psychological and social functioning. They provide empathy and counseling on interpersonal problems. Social workers help people function at their best in their environment, and they help people deal with relationships and solve personal and family problems.

Licensed Professional Counselors: These counselors are required by state licensure laws to have at least a master's degree in counseling and 3,000 hours of post-master's experience. They are either licensed or certified to independently diagnose and treat mental and emotional disorders.

Counselors can help a wide range of problems, including depression, addiction and substance abuse, suicidal impulses, stress management, self-esteem issues, issues

of aging, emotional health, and family, parenting, and marital or other relationship problems. They often work closely with other mental health specialists.

Sorting It Out

When you start your search, keep an open mind. A therapist *does not* need decades of experience, or a sheepskin from an ivy-league school, to be helpful. Credentials aren't everything. Even people with great credentials aren't necessarily great therapists. They may be smart, but that doesn't mean they have good common sense skill.

Where to Start?

Collect Names. "

Don't start with three names from your managed care company. Very likely, you don't have the company's entire list of provider. Insist on getting the whole provider list. Then ask friends and colleagues if they know a psychologist or psychiatrist who could make recommendations from that list. I am contacted by several people several times every month asking if I can make recommendations even though I am not on their provider's plan.

Other sources:

--Call a university psychiatry or psychology department and ask recommendations of people trained in that program. "At least that way you know they're under scrutiny," says Turner.

--If you're moving to a new city, ask your current therapist for referrals, or have him/her check with colleagues.

-- Check with friends and family.

There is no stigma in asking for help.

The First Appointment

Ask questions: How long has the therapist been in practice? How many patients have had your problem? What were the results? Ask about policies, fees, payment. But, don't bargain hunt for mental health care because your care is more important than a bargain fee.

Do they have a reputation for being professional, credentialed, and competent, with no lawsuits against them? And they must be an intuitive fit. You can't underestimate the value of a good intuitive match with somebody. If you ask them questions about themselves, and they become defensive, go somewhere else."

Another important point: Has your therapist been in therapy? It is amazing how many therapists have never undergone personal psychotherapy. How will they accurately help you with your issues if they do not have that experience with their

own personal therapist? There is also the risk they may also bring their own issues into your therapy."

Ask yourself:

- Do I feel reasonably OK with this person? Feeling totally comfortable isn't the best criteria, because if you're too comfortable, you're just chit- chatting, and that doesn't help you. The therapist is a professional with whom you can work and is not to become a friend.
- Is the therapist really listening to me? Is he or she asking enough questions? Especially in the first sessions, the therapist should be asking many questions, to become acquainted with you and the issues you are dealing with.
- Has the therapist asked what outcome you want from therapy; how you want your life to be? How will you know when you reach your objective if neither you nor the therapist has established a goal?
- Do you feel satisfied with the therapist's resources? For example, outside groups, books, seminars, movies, etc.
- Has the therapist listened to you and really heard and understood what you need the therapist to know and understand?
- Does what the therapist say make sense? Does it seem like good, or not-so-good, advice? Do you feel it will help you or not?

The bottom line is whether you feel your therapist is helpful for you or not.