

## **Finding a Therapist**

Looking for a therapist is a constructive positive thing to do in your life. It does not matter if you are seeking help for larger mental health issues, or if you need help gaining clarity or distance in a specific situation. A therapist can act as a supportive and caring professional to help you through whatever is going on in your life.

Because we seek therapy for such deeply personal and often hurtful problems, it is important to find someone you like and respect. In the beginning, it can be hard to talk about deeply personal issues with a total stranger. Your therapist knows this and should do everything in his or her power to help you feel comfortable.

Due to therapy's personal nature, it is important to realize that not everyone will suit your needs. You don't have to go to the first person you see. You may wish to interview a few people, either by phone or in-person, to find someone you feel comfortable with. Remember, you will be spending a lot of time with this person.

### **Before seeing a therapist**

Arriving prepared for your first therapy session is helpful. Here are some things to think about before seeing a new therapist.

- Write about the problem in detail. How does this problem affect you?
- What is your goal in therapy?
- What will you not tolerate in a therapist? Are there things a therapist might do that would prevent you from working constructively with them?
- What qualities would you like to see in your therapist? Are there qualities that would help you during therapy?
- While it is unethical for a therapist to promote his or her religious beliefs during therapy, there are some therapists who use a Christian, Spiritual or other religiously based approach. If the therapist is ethical, he or she will open about such religious affiliation. Discuss your own preference and reach an agreement on the place of such approaches in your therapy.
- Do you have any special concerns when looking for a therapist? If yes, what are they?
- Have you had any previous bad experiences from mental health professional? If yes, what are they? How did they affect you? What lessons did you learn from those experiences?
- Have you had any good experiences with mental health professionals? If yes, what are they? How have they affected you? What lessons did you learn from those experiences?
- Do you prefer a male or female therapist?
- Write down specific questions before meeting with your new therapist. Meeting a therapist for the first time can be a difficult experience, and most people find it helpful to have their questions written down.
- Therapists have different certifications and educations. Therapists at least have a MA or MS, along with a state certification. Often, therapists with a full PhD are much more expensive than those with a MA or MS. PhDs also have an area of

specialization and more supervised hours. However, the certification toward a licensed social worker is also rigorous and demanding. Having a good feeling about your therapist is more important than whether they have a PhD.

- There are therapists who have not gone through licensure. They sometimes present their therapy under a religious or spiritual umbrella. It is important to carefully consider your needs before accepting such a therapy. If you choose an unlicensed therapist, take extra care in finding one.

### **Where to look for a therapist**

- Frequently, people find therapists by getting recommendations from their doctor, a trusted friend, family members or a member of the clergy.
- The Yellow Pages of your local telephone book contain listings of therapy providers under such headings as “Psychologist,” “Social Workers,” and “Psychiatrists.” Unfortunately, the telephone companies do not require therapists to offer proof of their credentials when listing them.
- Other people feel most comfortable going to a therapist at their local community mental health clinic.
- If you are looking for help with a specific issue, there are specialized organizations on the internet to assist you. They might provide referrals to someone locally with experience working with your issue.
- People who have health insurance with mental health coverage can contact their insurance company for lists of providers who are qualified to treat a particular problem and participate with their insurance plan.

### **Insurance**

An important issue that you should understand is insurance. Your insurance company will often have a list of healthcare providers that they recommend. These recommendations are not made solely on the basis of how good the therapist is. These recommendations are made on the basis of (1) whether the therapist is willing to work with the insurance company’s paper demands; (2) the therapist’s credentials; (3) how competent the therapist is; AND (4) how much of a discount the therapist is willing to give the insurance company for the services rendered to you.

Possibly the best way to pick a therapist is to ask trusted friends or colleagues for recommendations. Once you get a name or two of therapists who are considered very good, you then go to your insurance company and see if the therapist is on their list. If not, contact the therapist and the insurance company and ask if they could work out a deal so you can see the particular therapist and be covered by your particular insurance. If an arrangement cannot be made, contact the therapist and see if there is a payment plan that can be arranged.

## **Screening Therapists**

If you have specific questions to weed out therapists, call and ask these over the phone before setting up a personal interview.

*These questions might include:*

- *Does the therapist accept your insurance?*
- *Is the therapist's payment schedule within your means?*
- *If the fee isn't within your means, ask if there is sliding scale.*
- *Does the therapist have experience working with your specific challenge?*
- *Ask any specific questions about preferred treatment on the phone.*
- *Ask any other questions that assist you over the phone.*
- *Can I call you at home? Schedule emergency session?*

## **Meeting your therapist for the first time**

Your first meeting should be viewed in part as the therapist's job interview. Ask the questions that are most important to you. Add others to determine whether your prospective counselor is sensitive to particular issues that matter to you. You may prefer to choose a counselor of your race, gender, economic background, sexual orientation, or religion. You have a right to make a choice. The fact is, finding a therapist that you can work with is sometimes tough and can take a few trials and errors before you get it right.

Possible questions (choose questions that fit your comfort level):

- What are his or her credentials? Where did they get their education? Where have they worked before? What is their job-related experience?
- Does this person have any experience working with people with your specific issues?
- What treatment methods does this person use?
- How do you arrange payment with this person?
- When and how often do you meet?
- In case of emergencies, how can you reach your therapist? What do emergency calls cost? What are this therapist's rules and boundaries in emergency situations?
- If you have any specific treatment forms that you especially like or dislike, ask how the therapist uses these forms.
- How would we work together on issues? How long would it take?
- If you are seeking help for anything controversial within psychology, ask your prospective therapist where they stand on those issues.
- Any other questions you feel would be important to ask your therapist to help you feel comfortable seeing him or her.

Questions for yourself after the initial meeting.

- Is this a person you can come to trust given the time and opportunity?
- Did the therapist put you at ease?
- Did you feel this person genuinely cares about you?
- Do you feel safe with him/her?
- Is he/she comfortable with you and your issues?

### Ongoing evaluation of your therapy process

- As you continue in therapy, talk to your therapist about your progress. You have a right to ask questions.
- Sexual conduct and/or contact between therapist and client is **NEVER** acceptable conduct.
- Outside relationships such as business, friendship and socializing with your therapist are also not acceptable because they create barriers to the therapeutic process.
- Do you feel that you are connecting to your therapist? Feelings of discomfort **are to be expected** in therapy, but feeling unsafe with your therapist is a major warning sign to you.