

HOW TO CHOOSE A THERAPIST

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If you or someone you love is seeking counseling with a mental health therapist, you are probably wondering how to choose the right person for your particular needs. Generally people seek counseling or therapy for help with mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, marital conflict, parenting problems, grief etc. These problems can be brought on by a loss, a crisis or a decision to take action on an existing problem. There are many professionals who offer these services and it can be difficult to determine who will best serve you. I want to offer some general principles for choosing your therapist so you will get the care you seek.

First, whom do you contact? Get recommendations from your primary care physician or from another trusted source (friends, family, EAP). Your health insurance will recommend those providers who participate in their network and can also give you some guidance about specialties. Once you have a few names, make contact. If you get voice mail, be sure to leave your name and number so they can call you back. Interview them over the phone and don't hesitate to ask about their training and their credentials. An ethical therapist will be comfortable answering your questions. It's important to see a practitioner who has formal training and is licensed. Examples of people who do therapy have these credentials listed after their names: LICSW, LMHC, Ph.D., Psy.D. CADC, and LMFT. These are practitioners who have completed advanced training, and have obtained licensure from the state in which they practice. Therapists work hand-in-hand with prescribers of medication, such as psychiatrists, primary care physicians, neurologists and nurse clinical specialists.

Your first meeting with the therapist is also part of selecting the right person for you. It is important that you feel comfortable with them. Therapy is difficult work and part of the work is building a relationship in which to help you work out your problems. The initial meeting will involve you answering many questions about your life, your history and your reasons for seeking help. This is necessary for the therapist to become acquainted with you. Methods of treatment are varied and, to name a few, include: insight based work where you gain awareness of how past experiences influence your current situation; interpersonal therapy that focusses on relationships through healthier expression of emotions and better communication skills; and cognitive behavioral therapy which focusses on changing erroneous thoughts and faulty beliefs to relieve emotional distress with an emphasis on the here and now. Ask the therapist about their approach in treating the problems you present.

Not all therapists treat all problems. Your problem might require a therapist who has specialized training and experience. For example, not all therapists treat eating disorders. A good therapist knows

their limitations and will recommend you see someone who can give you the kind of therapy you require.

In general ask yourself these questions when deciding on a therapist:

- Do I feel comfortable with the therapist?
- Does the therapist treat me with respect?
- Do I think the therapist understands my problem?
- Does the therapist clearly explain the business of fees, insurance and appointment times?
- Is the therapist licensed?
- Does the therapist explain treatment goals and methods he/she will use to help me achieve my goals?
- Does the therapist begin and end the sessions on time?
- Does the therapist show a willingness to answer my questions about the treatment?
- Does the therapist explain confidentiality and HIPAA?

If you take a little time to find the best therapist for you, you will be more likely to achieve the outcome you want from therapy. Psychotherapy can be a life changing experience.