

How to Choose a Therapist

When you're struggling or in emotional pain, taking the time to find the right therapist can feel like a hassle. You have a sense for what you're looking for, but there are a wide range of qualifications, different types of therapists, specializing in areas that might even sound foreign to you. What does it all mean? How exactly do you go about it in a way that doesn't take hours of research, multiple phone calls, multiple interviews (that can be costly), when you just need to start the process of healing quickly?

This article is intended to provide the essential information that you'll need to cut through the messiness of the process of finding and choosing a therapist. The choice is important, but you need a way to make an informed decision quickly. It can be done in two steps!

STEP 1 – CHOOSING 3 THERAPISTS TO INTERVIEW

Psychology Today Listings

One simple way to begin is to look at the listings on the website for Psychology Today (<https://www.psychologytoday.com>), which provides a picture and a short description of therapists in your zip code. I wouldn't spend too much time pouring over the descriptions (unless you just want to do that) because you'll gain all the information you need in the interview.

STEP 2 – THE INTERVIEWS

Understand that you have a right to have the therapist that is best for you and that you are essentially hiring someone to help you sort through deep heart-felt issues. Most therapists are willing to have a brief (FREE) introduction phone conversation; some are even willing to meet in-person briefly. Take the time to have this initial conversation. Below are some suggestions, DO's and DON'T's of what you might want to ask to help you quickly narrow the choice.

DO Ask Whether the Therapist has ever been in Therapy and for How Long

This question will strip the field of potential therapists by over half. Ok, admittedly, this is one of my biases, but a good therapist has always spent a bit of time *on the couch*, undergoing therapy and healing his or her own issues. Please know that: *a therapist can help you heal only as far as the therapist has gone in healing*. These days, universities often require that therapists have some time in therapy, so you may want to ask if they went beyond the requirements or how long they participated.

DO Ask about Education

There are two markers to consider: Education and Experience. Here's a list of potential Educational Degrees that you're likely to encounter in your search and a brief statement about each:

MS or MA usually in Counseling or Clinical Psychology - is a Masters Degree indicating at least 2 years of graduate school (2 years in addition to their college education).

LPC or Licensed Professional Counselor - the person has a Masters Degree of some sort and has been licensed in their state to practice counseling psychology. Licensure requirements usually involve a comprehensive test, education from an accredited institution, and some supervised internship experience.

LCSW or Licensed Social Worker - this person has a Masters level degree in Social Work and is licensed to practice.

PsyD in Counseling or Clinical Psychology - is a Doctoral level degree (requires usually 4 or more years of graduate school) that emphasizes preparation for counseling individuals. A person with a PsyD may or may not be licensed.

PhD usually in Clinical or Counseling Psychology - is a Doctoral level degree that could include equal emphasis on research and practical skills depending on the school. Like the PsyD, the person may or may not be licensed.

MD or Psychiatrist - a Medical Doctor who has completed medical school with a specialty in psychology. This person is able to write prescriptions and will often work in conjunction with another sort of therapist who treats the client in traditional therapy.

DO Ask about Experience

Some potential questions:

"How long have you been in practice?"

"Have you ever treated *my issue* before?"

"Do you primarily treat *adults, adolescents, children*?"

DO Ask about Orientation and Approach

This is the arena where people tend to get tripped up. As with physicians for the body, psychological therapists use a wide range of approaches and orientations. There is actually no quick way around this. You'll have to read and see what resonates with you. I am listing the emerging and integrative approaches first, which are followed by the conventional approaches.

Emerging and Integrative Approaches

Integrative therapy. It is quite common for therapists to combine approaches, but if a therapist tells you that they are "eclectic" or "integrative," ask them what orientations make up the combinations that are used. For example, I use Humanistic, Transpersonal, Depth Psychology, and Shamanic approaches in therapy.

Transpersonal therapy. Transpersonal therapy focuses on spiritual and meaning-based therapeutic transformation.

Depth Psychology. Explores what lies underneath the issue, looking at unconscious motives and how they play into what is happening with the issue and in life.

Shamanic Psychotherapy. You will not likely find this on any other list, though I suspect that will change in the next 10 years or so. Shamanism is the oldest form of healing on the planet. Combining the ancient wisdom of shamanism into a more modern accessible form allows direct access into the subconscious causal realm. Bear in mind that if a practitioner incorporates shamanism into their practice, there is a wide variation in how it is done...

Conventional Approaches – Listed directly from APA (Comments are mine)

Psychoanalysis and psychodynamic therapies. This approach focuses on changing problematic behaviors, feelings, and thoughts by discovering the unconscious meanings and motivations. Psychoanalytically oriented therapies are characterized by a close working partnership between therapist and patient. Patients learn about themselves by exploring their interactions in the therapeutic relationship. *** **Comment:** Psychoanalysis itself is often a *long* process, sometimes taking many years and much money; however psychodynamic therapies (not psychoanalysis) do tend to look for the deeper cause underlying the issue. You might consider asking how long a typical client stays in therapy to get an idea about what you're dealing with. Also, if you like the idea of dealing with the depths of the inner psyche, but are not particularly fond of this approach, look at Depth Psychology or Shamanic Psychotherapy.

Behavior therapy. This approach focuses on learning's role in developing both normal and abnormal behaviors. Several variations have developed since behavior therapy's emergence in the 1950s. One variation is cognitive-behavioral therapy, which focuses on both thoughts and behaviors. *** **Comment:** If you're wanting to talk about your *feelings*, this is probably not for you. If, however, you simply want to change a behavior

without taking into account what is underneath, these guys know how to do it, (*if you can stick with the program*).

Cognitive therapy. Cognitive therapy emphasizes what people think rather than what they do. Cognitive therapists believe that it's dysfunctional thinking that leads to dysfunctional emotions or behaviors. By changing their thoughts, people can change how they feel and what they do. *** **Comment:** I'm not sure I buy into the idea that there is any such thing as a "dysfunctional emotion," but that might just be me. These guys are looking to reprogram your thoughts and they're good at helping you do it, *if you can stick to the program.*

Humanistic therapy. This approach emphasizes people's capacity to make rational choices and develop to their maximum potential. Concern and respect for others are also important themes. *****Comment:** You will definitely feel supported and respected by this therapist. There is much room for exploration of emotions. Additionally, they will empower your transformation without getting in the way. Yes, I have a bit of a bias, but authentic compassion is a potent transformational agent. Every therapist should hold authentic compassion for the person they are working with, no matter what other sorts of intervention is used.

DON'T Choose a Therapist Based on Financial Considerations or Insurance

While it is understandable that financial considerations must necessarily be part of your choice, making your choice based solely on whether the therapist is covered by your insurance is a mistake. If you find a therapist that is perfect for you and is not covered by your insurance, simply ask the therapist if they can help you work it out. More often than not, therapists have a sliding scale.

DON'T Choose Aunt Susie's Therapist Without an Interview

I know that most people say that personal referrals are a great way to select a therapist, BUT, just because the therapist was good for Aunt Susie, doesn't mean that the therapist will be good for you. If you get a personal referral, interview the therapist before making a decision.

DO Trust Your Gut

Every step of the way in the process of choosing a therapist, you will have internal reactions. Pay attention to them. When you look at the *therapist's picture*, what effect does it have on you? Does it make you feel warm? Does the person look authentic? Would you want to be in a room with them for an hour? Though it may sound odd, pictures hold energy and energy can definitely tell you something. When you interview them over the phone, how does their *voice* feel to you? Do they have a sense of

authority? Is the voice soft or grating? Do you sense respect for you? And if you're having an in-person interview, you see, hear and sense them. Do you feel safe? Is your body relaxed (mostly)? Are you drawn to them? Listen to what your insides are telling you and trust your gut.