



Finding A Therapist

A Practical Guide

When you are in the process of healing, therapy can be of immense help. A good therapist works with you as you chart your own course of healing. It is very important to find someone with whom you feel you can have a positive working relationship. It is good to remember that your therapist is there to help you. S/he will be your employee, someone that you hire to help you in the process of healing. You should look at hiring a therapist in the same way you would hire anyone (e.g., a medical doctor, a person to clean your home). It is a process and it takes time.

Always keep in mind that therapists are, once again, there to help YOU. You are the most important ingredient in the recipe. If for any reason you don't feel comfortable, don't like the therapist's perfume/cologne, don't like the office setting, feel free to move on. It's a good idea to try to highlight important characteristics you feel the therapist must have in advance. For example, if you are black and female, sex and race might be important to you so you might want to look for a black female therapist. However, don't be too picky or you will eliminate all of your possibilities. For example, if you are looking for a married black female from the working class with an Anglo-Catholic theology, good luck!

A list of qualified therapists in your area, along with their areas of interest, qualifications and training, theoretical approach, prices and contact information can be obtained from the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy on 0870 443 5162 <http://www.bacp.org>. This can be a good place to begin your search.

Don't be afraid to shop around. It is not uncommon to interview several therapists before you find the one that "fits". Don't get discouraged. Phoning several therapists, for the initial consultation could be a good plan as it will give you an idea of what is out there as far as therapists in your area. However, don't become a professional shopper, that is, spending all your time interviewing therapists, and no time healing.

For some types of therapy, it is not required that a 'therapist' obtain a particular educational degree, serve in a residency or take a certifying exam (these things are required of licensed social workers, psychologists and psychiatrists but there are all types of "therapists"). Be certain to inquire about your potential therapist's schooling and/or training.

So, as you begin this journey, you will probably feel a bit nervous and hesitant. Here are a few questions that will help with the process.

Initial questions to ask before you even see the therapist:

These questions are general questions that can be answered either by your future therapist, or her receptionist.

- ✦ Do you have a free initial consultation? How long is this appointment?
- ✦ Describe your specific issues and ask if s/he has had experience with this area in the past.
- ✦ What are your fees? Do you have a sliding fee schedule? You can discuss this more in detail in your initial visit.
- ✦ How long are your sessions?
- ✦ Are they registered with a professional body? Can they provide you with the address and phone number of the licensing board? (IMPORTANT)
- ✦ How long have you been in practice? (IMPORTANT)
- ✦ What are your normal hours of operation? Do you make exceptions to these hours?
- ✦ What is your location?

If you talk directly to the therapist in this initial phone call, ask yourself:

- ✦ Did s/he seem approachable on the phone?
- ✦ Did s/he seem defensive or open in the discussion of fees?
- ✦ Did s/he seem interested?
- ✦ Can you live with the commute to and from his/her office? Is it accessible to you, if you are dependent on public transportation?

Questions to ask during your first visit:

Physical surroundings: Waiting Room and Building

- Is there plenty of parking in a well-lit area? Is there a bus stop nearby?
- Is a bathroom easily accessible?
- Is the decor in the waiting room comfortable? Is there anything in the waiting room that makes you feel overly uncomfortable?
- Is the receptionist (if there is one), approachable and friendly?
- Is there music in the waiting room, and if so, is it soothing or is it annoying?

Physical surroundings: Therapist's Office

- ✦ Are there plenty of choices where you can sit?
- ✦ Do you find anything uncomfortable about the furnishings, colour scheme, paintings or knickknacks? You will be staring at the walls for a while, what did you think of them? Having pleasant surroundings helps.
- ✦ Do you find the seating arrangement to be too close together, too far apart, or just right? Do you feel that it would be ok if you moved a seat to be more comfortable?
- ✦ Is the office relatively friendly and comfortable?
- ✦ If you like to sit on the floor, are there cushions on the floor?

Questions to Ask Yourself after Your First Visit with Your Therapist

After your first session with your therapist, you will probably be left with a lot of questions. It is also important to process through how you felt in the session. These questions might help:

- ✦ Did s/he seem friendly, approachable?
- ✦ Did s/he try to make you feel at ease?
- ✦ Where did s/he sit? Were you comfortable with that, or could you become comfortable with that?
- ✦ How do you feel s/he received your questions? Did s/he seem defensive or bored?
- ✦ What was her/his body language like? Did you feel s/he could be an ally in your healing?
- ✦ Did s/he seem overtly distant or disconnected?
- ✦ Was s/he too friendly?
- ✦ Did s/he come across as "know it all" or did s/he come across as someone who genuinely wants to help you discover your own healing journey?
- ✦ Do you feel you will be able to trust her/him, in time, with the deep personal issues that you need to discuss? Does your gut say you can trust her/him in time? [Note: A sense of anxiety or discomfort is common when starting any new relationship. Meeting with someone else to talk about painful issues will not be easy. Only you can decide if any sense of discomfort is because of the challenge of therapy or because you are sensing that this particular therapist is not appropriate for you.]
- ✦ Did you come away with a sense of hope that s/he can help you?

Other Questions to Ask the Therapist:

These questions might take a couple of sessions to ask, and that is perfectly ok. It is important that you feel comfortable. The following are not in any particular order

Fees

- ✦ Does s/he plan on raising her fees in the near future?
- ✦ Are you charged for a full session if you miss an appointment? How much notice does s/he require for cancelled appointments?

Availability

- ✦ If you were in a crisis, would s/he be available for emergency sessions?
- ✦ Is there an after hours number that you can use?
- ✦ Can you call him/her during the week if necessary?
- ✦ If you have any special requests of how s/he should contact you, (i.e. using a pager) is s/he flexible?
- ✦ Will she accept faxes or e-mails of issues you want to bring up in the next session?

Confidentiality

- What is kept confidential and is there ever a time s/he would feel it was right to breach that confidentiality?
- What are his/her policies concerning letters s/he writes on your behalf to third parties, such as GPs, employers, etc? Will s/he allow you to read any letters s/he sends out?
- Does s/he make it a firm policy to make you sign a waiver before s/he releases any information, no matter how seemingly mundane, about you to anyone?

Philosophy

- ✦ What is the therapist's background, specialty/interest area?
- ✦ What is their philosophy of therapy and the healing process?
- ✦ Why is s/he a therapist?
- ✦ How does the therapist define/view progress?
- ✦ How long does s/he think a person with your issues would need to see him/her?
- ✦ How will you know that it is time to stop seeing him/her?
- ✦ Who do they believe is driver of the bus (them or you)? That is, do they believe in a client directed or therapist directed therapeutic process?
- ✦ If you disagree with him/her about something, is it okay to have different opinions, or do s/he have to be right?
- ✦ How do they confront if confrontation is necessary?
- ✦ Is it his/her style to have a lot of continuity from one session to the next, with an overall plan, or is it her/his style more to go with the flow of whatever has come up for you that day?

- ✦ Sometimes it takes a while to determine if a therapist is right for a client and a client right for the therapist. How should either party let the other know if they feel that it's not working?

Expertise

- ✦ Have they ever dealt with clients with your issues before?
- ✦ Can they cope with a lot of topic switching in a session or do they prefer working on one issue per session?
- ✦ Are they willing to accommodate your needs if they are not familiar with the issues? Sometimes you can find a great therapist, who is not an expert in the field you are dealing with, but is willing to learn as you work together.
- ✦ If they have never dealt with the issues that you want to deal with, how will they learn about those issues?
- ✦ Have they dealt with issues in their own life, similar to the ones you are presenting? Can they keep their issues separate from yours?

Crisis Situations

- ✦ How do they feel about hospitalization? Do they look at hospitalization as a last ditch effort or do they use hospitalization as a control.
- ✦ If you or they feel you need medication, can they direct you to someone that they know and work with, if s/he is not a psychiatrist? (Note: only psychiatrists have a medical degree and are licensed to dispense controlled substances.)

General Questions

- ✦ How does the therapist take care of him/herself so they do not get burned out?
- ✦ Do they have a sense of humour? (Question to ask yourself)
- ✦ What do they believe about God?
- ✦ Are they planning to stay where they are for long? If you are looking at years of therapy, it is important to know that they will be there for you in the future.
- ✦ Will they allow you to read his/her notes? If no, why not?
- ✦ What does s/he do when s/he runs into a client in public?
- ✦ Do they know your previous therapist (if applicable)? And if so, will that be a problem?

Leaflet text adapted by SVOX from a "help" document on the Sanctuary MUD for abuse survivors. Original author unknown.