

CHOOSING A THERAPIST

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I. Types of therapists

Psychiatrists are medical doctors who prescribe medication for mental illnesses like depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder and schizophrenia. Many people with these disorders need to be on medication to help them regulate the biochemical component of their diagnosis. Most of these people also seek counseling from another professional, because most psychiatrists do not do the weekly counseling that supports and helps the person change their thinking, feeling or behavior patterns.

Psychologists are often researchers and testers who sometimes do therapy as well. Some focus on the therapy.

Psychotherapist is a term that indicates the professional in question can and does treat serious mental illness and is licensed to do so. They may also treat less serious problems and probably do. For those with a serious problem such as depression, or anxiety, it will be important to seek treatment from someone qualified.

The term Therapist is a generic one, sometimes just a shortened form of psychotherapist. This is a term that many professionals use to describe what they do and to indicate that they are licensed to do therapy.

Counselor is another rather generic term that is often used because people are more comfortable saying they are seeing a counselor than saying they are seeing a therapist. But neither “counselor” nor “therapist” is a legal term to really insure that the person is licensed. It is best to check the credentials of any person, asking them how they are licensed.

Life coach, or coach, is a relatively new profession, originally created to focus on people’s personal growth and goal setting abilities. It too is not a legal term. Anyone can call themselves a coach. Perhaps someone feels they are good at helping people but may not have had any formal training or credentialing. There

are credentialing bodies now and coaches who have had formal training will indicate they are members of an international coaching federation.

So how do you choose one of these?

If you are simply wanting to do some personal growth work and resolve some blocks that have been keeping you from being as successful or fulfilled as you want to be, you would choose someone who is a therapist, counselor or coach. Do check their credentials and interview them to see if they are a good match for you.

If you have some underlying problems with feelings of depression or anxiety, it is best to start with a therapist, counselor or psychotherapist. Coaches would not be able to help you with these issues. With any professional, again be sure to ask if they treat others with your issues and that they are qualified to do so. Even though these professionals cannot prescribe medication, any qualified professional who treats depression, anxiety or post-traumatic stress disorder will be able to help you decide if you need to see an MD for medication help as well.

If you start with a psychiatrist you will most likely leave there with a prescription and a referral to a therapist. This is best if you are experiencing severe distress.

II. Types of Therapy

Even after you have chosen the type of professional you need, and asked about their qualifications and credentials, it will be important to ask them about their philosophy of therapy or their methods. Most therapists today are not exclusive in their approaches to therapy, though some are. Many have taken the term eclectic to indicate they have several different methods they draw from depending on the type of client or the presenting issues. Ask them to explain any terms that you don't understand and see if they are able to express it in language that makes sense to you. Over use of jargon and the inability to put things in a lay persons language does not speak well for their ability to communicate, a trait that is most helpful in the therapeutic process.

Many therapists believe that unresolved trauma or issues from childhood cause people to live incomplete and diminished lives today. However, people come to therapy because of today's issues. So, as a therapist, most of my work is about the present. I explain to clients that any unresolved issues from the past will be showing up in the present. Current relationships, feeling stuck and unable to move forward, confusion, anger, sadness, anxiety: These problems are all experienced in the present. They may have their roots in the past, they may be based on decisions made in the past, but they are causing problems in the present and that is where we start

III. How do you decide if someone is a good match for you?

It may take a couple of sessions with a new therapist in order to really know if the person is a good match. During those sessions, feel free to ask questions. You should feel listened to and understood. What the therapist says should feel relevant and helpful. If you leave a session with a sense of relief, a feeling of finally being understood, and a renewed sense of hope, that is a great match. If you leave a session feeling confused or disappointed, it is important to talk with the therapist at the next session about those feelings. While therapists tend to be very empathetic and are usually able to understand and communicate an understanding of what you are saying, it sometimes takes a little while for them to really get it. But ultimately the goal is to work with someone you feel really “gets you”. If they don’t, after a few sessions, discussing it with them and trying to communicate anything you feel they don’t understand, it may be best to move on and try another therapist.

IV. Indicators of a Bad Match

A therapist should start where you are and give you their undivided attention. These are indicators that she or he is not doing that.

- If the therapist frequently changes the subject or asks you seemingly unrelated questions, sticking to his or her agenda instead of yours it is an indication that he or she is not on the same page with you. Ask why the therapist is directing the conversation that way.
- Telling you what to do, or giving a lot of advice is not what therapist’s do. Though they may advise you, they will not usually assume to know the answers that are right for you. They will instead lead you to answers based on what you already know and believe.
- Arguing with you, or being too invested in what decisions you make indicate a therapist who cannot put his or her own agenda aside.
- Answering phone calls during your session or any other non-attentive behavior is inappropriate.
- Staying too detached or clinical so that you feel like they are not real people is unnecessary distance. Therapists will not be your friend, but they will be friendly.
- Introducing therapeutic tools or elements without asking your permission. This should include any touch, movement, art, closed eye work, or any modality that is new to you. The therapist’s office should feel like a safe place. You should never feel forced to do something that is uncomfortable for you. The therapist should respect your comfort level and work to build safety.
- Therapists should not be your friend or encourage a personal relationship. Though you may meet at social gatherings or run into each other in the grocery store, therapists must guard against taking undue advantage of their clients, and this usually limits contact outside of the therapy office.