

How to Find the Right Therapist



It is easier to divide the process of finding a therapist into three stages: research, interview, and rapport.

Therefore, the first section of this article is related to the research you need to do if you have decided to see a therapist; the second section lists questions to ask your potential psychotherapist (e.g., regarding fees, treatments offered); the third section concerns the examination of your feelings and intuitions regarding your new therapist.

The Research of Finding a Therapist

It would be impossible to interview every therapist in your city, so the first step in choosing a therapist is narrowing down potential candidates. To do this, you must decide what factors are important to you: The distance to the therapist's office? The fee? The gender of the therapist?

Also relevant is deciding on the type of health professional. Depending on the intervention (e.g., therapy, medication, access to social programs) you need, you may look for a psychiatrist, clinical psychologist, Family and Couples Therapist, professional counselor, clinical social worker, and so on. Different types of mental health professionals might emphasize different processes in the development of your mental illness and recommend different treatments.

A psychiatrist, for instance, is more likely to emphasize your condition's biological aspects, put greater emphasis on neurobiological processes (like neurotransmitter imbalance) that give rise to the disorder, and recommend biological treatments like drugs. Another type of professional may put greater emphasis on environmental, sociocultural, or psychological factors—worldview, cognitive biases (i.e., thinking errors), lack of social support, loss, relationship problems, stressful workplace, discrimination, and so forth.

Tied in with the question of finding the right health professional is choosing the right psychological treatment. To find the right treatment, you may rely on the expertise of the therapist you have chosen or on the existing guidelines on best treatments for specific conditions; however, you need to remember that some

health professionals are unable to provide certain mental health treatments. For instance, at the present time, prescriptive authority is granted to only a small number of psychologists (depending on their training and place of practice). So the majority of psychologists are still not permitted to prescribe medications.

Interviewing the Therapist

The second step is to interview the therapists you have found (after doing the above research).



Yes, you are *allowed* to interview therapists. Many therapists are used to potential clients coming in and asking them a lot of questions. In my opinion, it may be a wise idea to avoid therapists who become defensive or dodge common questions regarding their education, training, or the effectiveness of the treatments they offer. I'll say more about this in the next section.

Some questions you might ask the potential therapist include:

- Are you a licensed therapist? Licensed by which licensing body?
- How long have you been working in this field?
- Tell me about your education and training background.
- What is your specialty?

- How much experience do you have working with people who have my problem, condition, or history—addiction, obsessive-compulsive disorder, borderline personality disorder, sleeping difficulties, a history of childhood abuse, relationship problems at work...?
- What treatments or approach do you offer?
- How is this intervention (e.g., biofeedback, cognitive-behavioral therapy, dialectical behavior therapy) supposed to work?
- Is this intervention effective for my problem/condition? On average, how long does the treatment take? How should I assess whether the treatment is working? What if this intervention does not work?
- Tell me about your fees and related policies. Do you use a sliding-scale fee (i.e., lower fees for people with lower income)?

Rapport with the Therapist

After you have chosen a therapist—and in case you have not received a diagnosis before, are fully assessed and informed about the treatment modality—you will spend many hours receiving treatment from this new person over the coming **weeks, months, and sometimes even years**

You will sometimes discuss very uncomfortable or intimate feelings with the stranger sitting across from you. There might be times during the sessions when you feel very vulnerable. Therefore, it is important that you choose a therapist with whom you feel at ease—someone with whom you have a good rapport and working alliance.

Good rapport refers to the presence of an implicit understanding between you and your therapist; it refers to feelings of connection and engagement that promote harmony.

As the **Canadian Psychological Association** notes, after you have verified the therapist's credentials and asked other relevant questions (such as those mentioned in the previous section), “the best way to determine if he or she is right for you is to use your feelings as a gauge. Does this person appear kind, understanding, and non-judgmental? Do you feel listened to and uniquely appreciated?”

It may not be easy to know right away whether there will be a good rapport between you and your therapist. Nevertheless, clients often feel a connection with certain kinds of therapists—ones who are **empathic, respectful, honest, and warm**.

Not surprisingly, clients like therapists who treat them as equals; they like health professionals whose behavior, attitude, and words make them feel safe, comfortable, and valued.

When you have a good rapport with your psychotherapist, you are more likely to

understand the therapist (and be understood) and agree on the goals of therapy and how to reach them. Some psychologists even believe that a good match and a strong **rapport are key to the success of the treatment** and are perhaps as important as the treatment modality itself.²

But do not spend too much time looking for the perfect therapist. Remember, you could always end therapy if you realize, during later sessions, you and your therapist are not a good match.

Do your homework, interview therapists, and then go with your guts. Keep your ultimate goal in mind (e.g., solving your relationship problems or treating your mental health condition). Once you have found a suitable and competent therapist, you can work together to come up with a plan and begin the work of improving your situation and living your best life.

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References

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