

How to Pick a Therapist for Your Mental Health

From Anonymous Contributor

“How do I know which therapist to pick?” This is an excellent question for the general population because there’s not much information on this topic. Most people get a referral from their doctor or look up practitioners online without much thought or insight. Finding the best therapist for you can be like finding a needle in a haystack.

The quality of a therapist makes or breaks the outcome you receive. Throughout trial and error seeing various therapists, here are a few insights to consider selecting your own mental health practitioner.

Know your challenges and goals before seeking a therapist

When you’re clear about your challenges and goals, you’ll end up working with the right practitioner. This isn’t the only qualification to seek out the right guidance, but it’s a recommended step you should take before seeing anyone.

You know yourself best. Don’t let a therapist decide your challenges and goals for you. Take the time to sit down quietly with yourself and do some inner contemplation.

Once you know your challenges and goals, it’s time to research therapy styles.

Pick the style of therapy aligned to solve your challenges and goals

Therapy comes in all shapes, sizes, and styles. There’s everything from cognitive behavioral therapy to dialectical behavioral therapy to solutions based therapy to mindfulness-based therapy.

Take an hour or two to research all the different styles on the Internet. Some styles are more suited to address your challenges and help achieve your goals.

You’ll find therapists have different credentials, licensing and education backgrounds. Therapists may be called a Licensed Professional Counselor, Marriage and Family Therapist, Licensed Clinical Social Worker, Psychologist or Psychiatrist. Here’s a quick rundown of each kind:

Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC) typically receives 4 years of undergraduate education in addition to 2 years of a masters program. They receive 3,000 hours worth of clinical practicum and take a licensing exam.

Marriage and Family Therapist (MTF) is the same as LPC, they’re more focused on relationships in the therapeutic setting.

Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW) is the same as LPC, they have more training working with diverse populations, government-funded programs and hospitals.

Psychologists are doctors who receive an additional 4 years of education after they complete their undergraduate education. They can either focus on research which would make them a Ph.D., or clinical studies which would make them a PsyD. Psychologists also take a licensing exam, are board certified and can work with clients.

Psychiatrists are medical doctors who attend medical school after their undergrad education. They also do a two-year residency at a hospital and become board certified after they take their exams. Unlike all the other types of therapists, psychiatrists can prescribe medication for mental and behavioral symptoms. They typically don't do 1-1 talk therapy but they're trained to do so if needed.

All therapists receive continuing education on various topics, techniques, and specialties. It can be overwhelming to decide which type of therapist you want to work with. It doesn't matter what specific credential and licensure your therapist has. What matters most is how effective they are addressing and treating your problems. Take the time to research all the different styles and determine which style is most aligned with your challenges and goals.

Ask for referrals from your general practitioner, guidance counselor and circle of influence

It's a crapshoot finding a good therapist from an online database. The best practitioners are going to come from your circle of influence such as your friends and family. Ask people in your circle of influence such as close friends, family members or your doctor if they know of any therapists. Ask them a few general questions including how their experience was working with the therapist and how effective were addressing their challenges.

At this point in your research, narrow your options to 3-4 practitioners. Picking a therapist is similar to shopping for a new car. You want to have a few options and test drive several therapists before deciding who to work with. Schedule consultations with each of your options and prepare a list of questions in advance to ask them during your consultation.

If you're unsure of what to ask them, here are a few questions to ask during your consultation to pick a therapist that's right for you:

- What's your licensure and education?
- What style or philosophy of therapy do you use in your practice? What does that mean? How does that work?

- What's your experience working with clients who have [inset specific demographic, issue or diagnosis]? (This could be age, gender, sexual orientation, depression, bipolar, ADHD, LGBTQ, PTSD, trauma, sexual abuse, etc.)
- Do you take my insurance? What's my copay? What's your out of pocket cost if I'm uninsured?
- What are your policies when I'm in crisis?
- Do you offer couples/family counseling?
- Do you meet clients on an ongoing basis or do you end the therapeutic relationship after a specific amount of time?
- Will you be able to meet my around schedule? When can we have our first session?
- Do you have plans to close your practice anytime soon?
- If we're not a match, can you recommend another therapist to me?

There are many more questions you could ask during a consultation, but the answers to these questions should give you a rough idea if the therapist is a good match for you. Ask these questions to 3-4 therapists before making a decision on which therapist you want to work with.

Additionally, you may want to schedule an initial session with each candidate to test a session. During the session, make a few mental notes on the following:

- Do I feel comfortable sharing my thoughts, feelings, history, goals, dreams, and fears with the therapist?
- How well does the therapist listen to me?
- How well does the therapist offer advice? Do they answer my questions thoughtfully, practically and realistically?
- Does the therapist challenge my assumptions and beliefs in ways that are beneficial to my progress?
- Is the therapist confidential, empathetic and compassionate?
- Does the therapist hold me accountable to my goals?
- How much does the therapist talk about themselves? This is crucial! A great therapist rarely talks about themselves. Many therapists talk about themselves during sessions with clients. This is absurd! We pay therapists to help us with our problems, not the other way around.
- Can I envision myself building a relationship with this therapist over the long term?

After collecting this information from your consultations and intake sessions, you'll have a gut instinct about who you want to work with. Congrats! You achieved a huge accomplishment taking care of your mental health, but guess what? The work isn't over.

Be a ruthless boss in your therapeutic relationship

Remember you're the employer in your therapeutic relationship. You pay the therapist to help you solve the specific problems you're trying to fix and achieve the goals you want to attain. Just

like in an employee/employer relationship, the boss can keep or fire their employer at any time. Keep this mentality throughout your therapeutic relationship especially in the first 3-6 months of working together.

It takes time for change and healing to occur so be patient with yourself. A good therapist will give you homework or reading assignments between sessions. Take this seriously or you won't see progress.

A few months into your therapeutic relationship, take a few moments to recall where you were and where you are now. Do you see progress? Is the therapist helping you? If you need an outside opinion, ask a close friend or family member if they see any progress in your happiness and mental health. This is extremely challenging especially if you're depressed and unmotivated. That's why outside opinions are helpful in your assessment. Remember you're the boss and you should stay aware of your progress for the therapeutic relationship to be effective.

If you're not seeing any progress, it may be time to pick a new therapist. You can either cancel your next session or tell your therapist this will be your last session with them. Most therapists will understand your decision so don't be scared to end the relationship. They may want to have some type of closure. It's up to you whether or not you want to have closure with the therapist, just make sure you're comfortable if you accept their offer. If they're willing to recommend a referral another therapist for you to work with, kindly accept the offer.

Even though you should be a ruthless boss in your therapeutic relationship, you should also be aware of your behavior in the relationship. Do you take the feedback your therapist suggests? Do you complete your homework and reading assignments? Are you an active or passive participant in your treatment?

If you're not getting results in your treatment, it's not necessarily the therapist's fault. You may need to ask yourself if you're actually participating in your treatment. There's a funny joke that holds truth: How many psychologists does it take to screw on a light bulb? None. The lightbulb has got to want to change itself.

Here's a helpful tool you may consider as you assess the progress in your therapeutic journey:

In order to heal or achieve a goal, the energy you put forward must be greater than your resistance.

Consider the amount of energy you bring to your treatment. This is difficult if you're depressed. Finding the energy to take action and feel better is like climbing a mountain. However the therapist should give you tools to generate energy and help you make healthy decisions to lower the resistance you have toward feeling better.

A few closing remarks on how to pick a therapist

You deserve to live a quality life. Seeking help for any mental health challenge or problem is paramount to health and healing.

Some therapists aren't the best and very few are exceptional. Amazing life transformations occur when you pick a therapist who's talented and a great fit for you to work with. Don't be discouraged if you end up with a crappy therapist. Move on and find someone else who'll get the job done. Just because a therapist isn't effective doesn't mean they're a bad person. They're simply not a good match for you. That's okay!

There's no shame seeking help. Mental health can't be solved alone. It takes a treatment team to heal and feel good. If you have shame seeing a therapist, throw away your pride and just try it. You're not sick or a bad person. You're doing yourself a huge service for your health, wellness, and happiness. Not only will you benefit, but everyone in your life will benefit too.