

# Choosing a Therapist

When you have made the decision to seek help for an emotional or mental health problem, it is important to choose your therapist carefully. Take the time to determine your therapy goals, perform the necessary research and ask the right questions of therapist candidates. Doing your homework will ensure a higher level of satisfaction with the therapist you select.

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## Types of Therapists

The type of therapist that is right for you will depend on your problem and situation. There are different kinds of professional counselors, including:

- **Psychiatrists:** These doctors have completed medical school and a residency in psychiatry. They are also licensed to prescribe medications.
- **Psychologists:** These licensed professionals possess doctorate degrees in psychology and typically have two years of supervised training.
- **Psychoanalysts:** These therapists have doctorate degrees in psychiatry or psychology, as well as up to five years of supervised training. They have usually undergone psychoanalysis themselves.
- **Social workers:** Licensed or certified social workers possess master's degrees plus typically two years of supervised, post-graduate training.
- **Family or marriage counselors:** These professionals have master's or doctorate degrees and typically two years of supervised clinical experience. (Note that licensing requirements may vary from state to state.)

When choosing a therapist, you should also consider his or her approach to counseling and treatment. This methodology should match your needs and goals of therapy. Most therapists adopt one or a combination of the following approaches:

- **Psychotherapy:** This type of counseling helps explore unconscious conflicts, unresolved past issues and defense mechanisms that may trigger undesired thoughts, feelings and behaviors to produce change.
- **Behavioral cognitive therapy:** This type of therapy aims to replace your undesired behaviors with useful ones and to help you identify and alter your ways of thinking and behaving to produce change.
- **Humanistic therapy:** This approach to therapy is based on the principle that people are continually growing and self-actualizing. Humanistic therapists focus on creating a safe place for patients to explore new ways of thinking, feeling and behaving to produce change.
- **Experiential therapy:** Similar to humanistic therapy, this approach uses experience-based, emotionally charged methods to produce change.
- **Family therapy:** This type of therapy focuses on the dynamics of family relationships.
- **Marital (couples) therapy:** This approach concentrates on improving the dynamics of your relationship with a significant other and involves both partners participating in treatment.
- **Group therapy:** This type of counseling allows you to relate to others with similar problems, provide and receive support and learn new social skills in a group setting.

## Other Factors to Consider

- **Gender:** You may feel more comfortable talking to a same-sex therapist, or you may prefer the expertise and insight of a professional of the opposite sex. Consider this factor carefully.
- **Cost:** What can you afford out of pocket? Many insurance plans cover at least a portion of the costs for outpatient therapy or may require a copayment.
- **Time:** Talk therapy involves meeting on a regular basis (typically for 45 to 50 minutes a week for at least a few months) with a therapist at his or her office or in a health-care facility.
- **Treatment techniques:** Are you willing to take prescribed medications that may have side effects? Are you willing to get any additional medical treatments that may be required? Are you willing to attend group, family or marital counseling if it is recommended?

## Questions to Ask a Therapist Candidate

1. Are you accepting new patients at this time?
2. How long have you been in practice and what is your specialty?
3. What is your training? Psychiatrists: Are you board certified by the American Board of Psychiatry? All other therapists: What is your license, degree and training?
4. Do you belong to any professional associations or groups?
5. With what hospital, medical group or facility are you affiliated?
6. Where do you practice? What are your office hours?
7. How long is each session?
8. What type of therapy and special techniques do you practice?
9. Do you treat my kind of problem?
10. Will you prescribe any medications?
11. What type of clients do you serve?
12. Do you participate in my insurance plan?
13. Do you have a paging service? What happens if you are not available in an emergency?
14. Has anyone ever made a complaint about you? How were these complaints resolved? (Call the state licensing board to confirm.)

## Your Final Decision

Your therapist should be professional, reliable, punctual, attentive to your needs and concerns, insightful, open-minded and a good listener.

While it is difficult to draw conclusions from first impressions and your initial phone conversation, you should get a feel for these qualities by the end of your initial consultation.

## Here when you need us.

Call: 833.812.5181

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Web ID: HISD