



# Choosing a Therapist

Choosing the right therapist is an important first step. Finding a therapist who is a good fit for you will facilitate an easier and more comfortable journey to wellness. Locating a therapist may seem like an overwhelming challenge, so here is a guide for what to look for and what questions to ask.

## Where to Start:

1. **Health Insurance Coverage.** Contact your insurance company and get the details of your coverage. Use our Mental Health Insurance for Dummies handout to assist you with the questions you need to ask.
2. **No Health Insurance Coverage.** If you don't have insurance, or if you've exceeded your maximum number of visits for the year, therapists' fees can be steep. But some may give you a break based on your income. Many providers offer a **sliding scale**, and sometimes therapists' websites advertise this offering. However, many therapists have limits on how many reduced-fee patients they can see, so you'll need to check and make sure they can accommodate you.

If you can't find a therapist with a sliding scale in your area — or their fees are still too high — another option is a **community mental health center**. These are government-subsidized facilities that offer therapy at lower rates than private practitioners.

Recommended website: <http://www.wheretofindcare.com/How-To-Pick-A-Community-Mental-Health-Center.aspx> (this website allows you to find, compare & rate community mental health centers).

Some university psych departments or medical schools offer therapy to the local community at reduced rates, on sliding scales or even free!

**Choosing the type of professional you are looking for:** There are different kinds of mental health professionals, so if you aren't sure what type of helper you are looking for, the website below has a breakdown of each type to help make your decision a little easier:

<http://psychcentral.com/lib/types-of-mental-health-professionals/00013>

This website tells you some great information about some of the providers practicing in your area:

<http://psychologists.psychcentral.com/404.html>

(Remember that the impressiveness of someone's degree doesn't necessarily correlate with how well they'll be able to help you.)

**Choosing the best provider for YOU.** Consider the following before you decide on a particular provider:

- How far are you willing to travel for services?
- What days/times are you available for appointments?
- Do you have a preference for a MALE or FEMALE provider?
- Do you have a preference for a LCBTQ-friendly provider?
- Do you have a preference for a FAITH-BASED provider?

After you have chosen a provider from your insurance company's provider list (if applicable) or another source, make sure the provider is still practicing in the area. Insurance websites aren't always up-to-date! Google them! But beware, online review of therapist are a hotly contested area, so don't put too much stock in them. Some providers will have websites that mention their approaches, areas of specialization and FAQs. They may also provide an email. If the provider you are interested in doesn't have a website, it is fine to call them up and ask them a little about themselves.

### **Making First Contact:**

Here is an example of how to leave a phone message or send an e-mail to a provider that you are interested in seeing:

**[NAME and CONTACT INFO]** Hi, my name is \_\_\_\_\_. I'm looking for a \_\_\_\_\_ (type of provider you are looking for, e.g., therapist, psychiatrist, etc...). My telephone number is \_\_\_\_\_. It's okay to leave a message there.

**[REQUEST]** Could you please let me know if you are taking new clients, and if so, how soon I might see you? I am having trouble with \_\_\_\_\_ (your identified problem or symptoms) and think I need some assistance. I would be interested in your thoughts on that issue.

**[HOOK]** Do you have much experience working with people with \_\_\_\_\_ (your particular issue)? If you could let me know very briefly what general techniques you use, I'd appreciate it. Thank you. I look forward to hearing from you.

Technical skills are not the only thing you're looking for. The feel of the message or conversation should suggest this person also has the personal characteristics of **empathy**, **compassion**, and perhaps (this would be trickier to determine over the phone) some **wisdom** as well! You're looking for a connection that **feels right**, and that feeling should start to develop over the telephone before you even get to their office. I hope you can find several such candidates in your search process!

### **Questions to Ask When Interviewing a Therapist:**

- *What is your training? (i.e. what certification or degrees do you hold?)*
- *How long have you worked in this field?*
- *How does the treatment work?*
- *How will we assess my progress?*
- *How much will treatment cost?*
- *What do you think is the goal of the therapy?*

- *What is your approach?*
- *What methods do you employ?*
- *What's the number of sessions you think we'll need?*
- *What's expected from me? (For instance, are there homework assignments?)*

Be sure you are able to connect with the therapist. As you ask questions and listen to the answers, note how the conversation feels.

**Ask yourself these questions DURING and AFTER your first session:**

- *Did the conversation feel natural and comfortable?*
- *Did you feel safe and heard by the therapist? Do you feel they understood you?*
- *Was the therapist condescending or judgmental?*
- *Did the therapist seem like an authentic person or were they playing a role?*
- *Was the therapist passive or active in the session? What do you like better?*
- *Does it seem like the therapist will be open to hearing about all your feelings, including frustrated feelings relating to them?*
- *Did the therapist have a positive outlook on life?*
- *Did you feel better or worse after the session? (Remember that sometimes it is normal to feel exhausted or sad after a session, especially if talking about something for the first time.)*
- *Did you feel comfortable with the therapist?*
- *Does this seem like a safe place to express your thoughts, concerns and feelings?*

**What to Do if You Don't Connect With Your Therapist:**

1. ***Talk to your therapist.*** People sometimes feel angry or discouraged about their therapy. If this is you, discuss these concerns with your therapist. Don't be afraid to ask questions and voice dissatisfactions. The goal is for your therapy to help you, not invite more stress. A good therapist will be open to hearing your concerns and discussing your dissatisfaction with you.
2. ***Get a second opinion.*** If you feel that you cannot talk to your therapist about your concerns, consider consulting with another professional. Usually the therapist you are seeing can suggest someone you can consult.
3. ***Consider changing therapists.*** Good therapists realize that they might not be appropriate for every person. An important question to ask yourself is "**Am I changing in the direction that I want to change?**" if you do not feel that you are improving, and after discussing it with your therapist, it does not seem likely that you will improve, ask for a referral to another therapist who might be a better fit for you.

**Notes:**

**\*\*ETSU Counseling Center Mission Statement:** The primary mission of the East Tennessee State University Counseling Center is to provide assistance to students, helping them to succeed at the University and in life. The Center strives to support the academic mission of the University through curricular and co-curricular activities that include counseling, prevention programming, training and supervision, and teaching. As a staff we are committed to providing a safe place for students where they are respected for who they are, and where they are empowered to realize their own identity and potential. Our goal is to promote the optimal development of all individuals and to provide appropriate assistance to those who are struggling with difficult life issues. The Center strongly supports collaboration and through such, the creation of a culture of mental and physical health. We envision a campus where the members of the University are engaged in the development of a strong and vibrant community that celebrates the human spirit. To this end we believe it is imperative to advocate for social justice, respect for diversity of ideas and people, and to affirm the value of each individual.

\*This handout was adapted from various online sources. (<http://jezebel.com/5703322/how-to-find-a-therapist>; <http://www.psycheducation.org/FAQ/find.htm#therapist>; <http://www.abct.org/DOCS/Members/FactSheets/GuidLine.pdf> )

Printed by the ETSU Counseling Center, Fall 2014