

# Finding and Choosing a Therapist

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One of the common roadblocks to getting appropriate help is deciding on a therapist. If you are feeling overwhelmed, it is easy to be stopped at this stage by all the possible considerations and unknown answers. But even if you are only ambivalent about seeing a therapist, this can be enough of an excuse to put the whole thing off.

If you are finding it hard to decide on who to call, or you don't know what to consider, I offer these thoughts...

You may have seen on-line directories of therapists of different stripes and not know how to choose. Most allow you to search by location and by other factors that might be important to you (male vs. female; theoretical orientation; specific types of training and qualification; different degrees and licenses; etc.). However, sometimes these choices just make the task harder by implying that you should take all these factors into account.

*It's easier than you think.*

If you already have a distinct preference for any particular factor, by all means follow that. For the rest, most of the time it matters less than you might suppose. For example, the most common "symptoms" that cause people to consider therapy are those associated with stress, depression, and anxiety. Almost any well-trained therapy professional will be able to work with you on those, regardless of what their "specialty" is. Most accredited graduated schools are rigorous and the therapist will tell you if he or she is not appropriate for your situation or needs.

*Here is what I think is most important: "Fit."*

*Fit* refers to how well you work with your therapist and how comfortable you are with him or her. In particular, "working alliance" has been shown in research to be one of the best predictors of good outcomes from therapy. The bad news is there is no way to tell this in advance. The good news is that you can almost always know within one to three sessions. That is one reason I consider the first session(s) to be "consultations," until both I and my client agree that this is a good match and we agree on how to proceed.

In one to three sessions you will know whether you have a good working relationship or not. Talk it over with your therapist. Any good therapist would be happy to offer referrals to other professionals if you don't feel comfortable.

*So, I recommend you try this...*

If a therapist has been recommended by someone you trust and who knows you, that's a pretty good place to start. Make an appointment, see how it goes, feel free to change therapists if the fit is not there.

*If that is not an option...*

1. Do a search by location (e.g., zip code) in one or more directory (found on the Web, or consult your health insurance website); adding restrictions based on male vs. female (if you care) or other things you already have strong feelings about (e.g., a Christian counselor). Don't get bogged down on minor preferences because 'fit' will be much more important.
2. Pick the therapist who is most convenient – near your home or your job or a regular coffee shop, etc. – or who for whatever reason catches your attention (but keep it somewhat convenient, if possible).
3. Call him or her, briefly describe your situation and ask if he or she works with people in situations like yours. Clarify issues about costs and insurance or any other make-or-break concerns you have. You can also ask about their approach to therapy to see how it strikes you. (Leave your number if you get voicemail and have the conversation when they call you back. Don't waste this moment of initiative!)
4. If at that point you are feeling okay about the person you are talking to, make an appointment. If you are reluctant to do so, be honest with yourself about whether you are real reservations about this particular psychologist, or whether reservations are just helping you to avoid dealing with your issue.

The most important thing about getting the help you need? *Don't dither*. Spending hours not deciding is just another way to avoid doing something. And on the positive side, once you have established a relationship with a therapist, he or she will be an emotional resource to you as you face the inevitable psychological challenges, bumps, and bruises that come with your chosen career path.

[This material was adapted from a page on the website ([www.RobertGarlan.50webs.com/findtherapistlinks.htm](http://www.RobertGarlan.50webs.com/findtherapistlinks.htm)), which includes links to some therapist directories.]