



How to Choose a Therapist

Joe DeNicholas

(read time: 4 minutes)

Therapist-client mismatch can result in lackluster results, discouragement, and frustration, not to mention copious amounts of wasted time and money. The chosen therapist may not be trained in the best treatment for your condition – when they only know how to use a hammer, everything is a nail. Mismatch can also contribute to a therapeutic alliance that is shaky at best or, at worst, feels unsafe to the client. When a client doesn't feel safe and comfortable, they are unable to be vulnerable, one of the key elements required for the work to be productive.

Taking the time to find the right therapist is more than worth it. The following guide will help you navigate your way by providing some key points to consider. [Questions you may want to ask a therapist you are interviewing will be highlighted in blue throughout.](#)

1. Education and Specializations

PsyD. LMFT. LSW. LCSW. LPC. LAC. What are all those letters?! There are quite a few different tracks that allow one to practice clinical mental health (aka therapy), and varying levels of qualification within each track. Also, experience and specializations matter, and it is likely wise to be wary of the therapist who claims to be able to treat many types of disorders and demographic groups with a high degree of proficiency.

[What do the letters after your name mean, and why did you choose that qualification track?](#)

[What are your specialties, and how long have you been practicing them?](#)

[Approximately how many clients have you treated with a condition similar to mine?](#)

2. Treatment Type

Each therapist has a particular affinity for, and training in, one or more treatment types. Some treatment types focus more on the cognitive aspects of experience, others the somatic or body-based aspects. Some seek to analyze the client's mind to determine the root cause of an affliction, while others focus on compassionate and empathic interaction.

[What treatment type\(s\) do you practice, and why did you choose to focus on those?](#)

[What treatment do you think is best for someone like me, and why? What other types of treatment are typically used to treat conditions like mine?](#)

[How long does it typically take for the recommended treatment to produce the intended outcomes?](#)

[What is your general stance around medication support?](#)

3. Treatment Style

How would you describe your general treatment style? Would you say you lean toward a more confrontational or passive style?

What client characteristics do you struggle with the most, and why?

What is the most common criticism you hear from clients about your style or approach?

How do you measure client progress, and what do we do if treatment isn't working?

4. Fees and Payment

What is your rate per session?

Do you take insurance? If not, why not?

5. Homework

Do you typically suggest home practice work in between sessions?

What kinds of home practice do you typically prescribe?

6. Session Length

Session length matters. I like to go deep with clients, so I found 50- and even 60-minute sessions to be inadequate, and some types of treatment simply can't be crammed into an hour.

How long are your sessions, and why do you believe that to be the optimal amount of time?

7. Therapist Growth & Evolution

Therapy is dissimilar to other forms of medical treatment because therapists aren't "just" diagnosing a condition and prescribing an impersonal treatment like a pill; the therapist is deeply embedded in the treatment and healing processes. *Ideally, the therapist is a model of sanity and health resulting from a serious and sustained transformative effort.* What if you went to ski school and the instructor, while very knowledgeable during the morning classroom session, falls all over themselves when you head to the mountain? Would you still trust them to teach you how to ski at a high level? Similarly, how can a therapist justify guiding a client through the (often) arduous process of self-transformation without having first experienced it themselves?

The following questions can seem a bit personal, and, to some degree, they are. However, notice that they aren't asking deeply personal questions such as *what* the therapist is working on or struggling with, they are about *what level of importance and priority the therapist has placed, and continues to place, on their own evolution.*

Have you seen a therapist in the past, and do you see one regularly now?

How do you stay healthy and continue evolving – what does your daily work (i.e., not relaxation, coping, and healthy distraction) look like?

TIP: You'll know within a couple sessions if you feel safe, comfortable, and compatible with a therapist. Don't waste time, money, and emotional energy trying to put a square peg in a round hole. Not everyone is for everyone – no harm, no foul, just move on – quickly.