

CHOOSING A THERAPIST OR COUNSELOR

Every therapist and counselor is different. Each one has particular strengths, interests, ways of working, and styles of relating. It is important to find someone who is qualified, experienced, skilled, and a good match for you.

I think the best way to find a therapist or counselor is by getting recommendations from people you know (i.e. friends, co-workers, family members, teachers, doctors, etc.). However, you can also look on the internet or in the phone book, or request names from your health insurance company.

Should I see a psychotherapist/therapist or counselor?

Technically speaking, these terms mean different things, but many people use them interchangeably. What's most important though, is finding someone you are comfortable with who can help you. Whether they refer to themselves as a psychotherapist, therapist, or counselor is not the crucial point.

Are there different kinds of professionals who provide psychotherapy and counseling?

In California where I practice, professionals from different disciplines can be licensed to provide psychotherapy and counseling. Unfortunately, the professional titles can be confusing or misleading. For example, Licensed Clinical Social Workers (LCSW), such as myself, can practice psychotherapy and counseling. In fact, social workers provide the majority of psychotherapy/counseling/mental health services in the United States. Marriage and Family Therapists (MFT) don't just work with couples or families, they work with individuals too. Psychologists (Ph.D. or Psy.D.) can also provide psychotherapy and counseling, and so can psychiatrists (M.D. or D.O.), even though most focus on prescribing medication.

Despite their different education and credentials, I believe that in direct clinical practice (meaning psychotherapy or counseling), the various professional groups tend to be more similar than distinct. However, each therapist/counselor varies tremendously in terms of their experience, skills, strengths, style, personal qualities, etc.

What are some things to consider when choosing a therapist/counselor?

Because all therapists/counselors are different, you might want to speak with a few on the phone, or meet them in-person before deciding who to work with. Some important research has concluded that feeling respected and understood by the therapist/counselor is a crucial factor in bringing about positive change and achieving your goals.

Much of what I am going to say can apply to choosing an individual, couple, or family therapist/counselor. However, let's assume you want help for your child.

Experience

I recommend asking about the therapist's experience working with children the age of your child, and with the kinds of things you are concerned about (i.e. aggression, difficulties adjusting to school, coping with some kind of trauma or life change, bed-wetting, anxiety, ADHD, autistic spectrum disorders, developmental delays, etc.).

Approach

I also suggest asking about the therapist's approach with children. For example, does the therapist only work individually with children, or will she/he also want to meet with other members of family too? This is very important because family meetings are often essential to helping a child.

If the therapist only works individually with children, I recommend discussing how the two of you will communicate about your child in order to monitor progress, and talk about concerns or suggestions. If the therapist does not work with families, you might want to find out who she/he recommends for family meetings.

Personal Considerations

Personal considerations are another thing to consider when selecting a therapist. Do you think your child would prefer/be most comfortable with a male or female therapist? Do you have a preference about this for your child, yourself, or your family? For some people this is very important, for some it is less so, and for others, not at all.

Is there something about your child, you, or your family that you want to make sure the therapist knows, understands, and appreciates? For example, you may want a therapist who is gay-friendly, or familiar with your culture, or religious/spiritual beliefs. If things like these are important to you, I recommend bringing them up during your first conversation with the therapist.

Practical Matters

Practical matters (i.e. location of the therapist's office, schedule, fees/insurance, etc.) should also be considered when selecting a therapist. Although you won't know at the outset how long your child, you, or your family will work with the therapist, I suggest selecting one you can go to regularly for a period of time rather than picking one you can only see infrequently, or for only a few times. It might take some consistent focus to bring about the changes you want and achieve your goals.

Your Experience of the Therapist

After talking with the therapist on the phone, or in-person, I recommend asking yourself questions like:

- Did the therapist conduct her or himself professionally?
- Did the therapist respond well to your questions?
- Did therapist seem to listen carefully?
- Did the therapist keep the focus on you and your situation?
- Did you feel understood and respected?
- Do you think your child, you, and your family members would feel comfortable working with him/her?
- Did the therapist inspire a sense of confidence and hopefulness in you?

Your answers to these questions are very important because the more comfortable, respected and understood you feel, and the more confidence you have in the therapist, the more likely you are to achieve the changes you desire.

There is much, much more than can be said about choosing a therapist. But, I hope that what I have written will be some of assistance to you.

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