

Choosing the Right Therapist for You

As a psychologist, I'm aware that for many, finding a new therapist feels akin to rolling dice and seeing what turns up. In these days of managed health care, you're likely to be choosing a stranger's name from a provider's list, and the arbitrary nature of the selection process can feel extremely unsettling, especially for first-time therapy clients.

Clearly there are several practical considerations that need to be addressed first, such as scheduling compatibility, fees, insurance issues, etc. Beyond the basics, however, if you are looking to establish a truly positive therapeutic alliance with a clinician but aren't sure how to ensure that the person you're sitting across from is the right therapist for you, I believe the following tips can help you in your selection process.

Ask for a referral: If you know someone in therapy, this can be a good starting point. Don't worry, therapists are held to exacting standards of ethics and confidentiality that prohibit them from sharing any of your personal information with the person who referred you, and theirs from you. Additionally, *most* clients have a pretty solid instinct about the quality of their therapist. There are some exceptions, however, and, also, the issue your referral source is in therapy for may be totally unrelated to your own, so even if you've been given a trusted name, the selection process doesn't stop there!

Ask about areas of expertise: There are many therapists out there who may be wonderful clinicians without being the right clinician for *you*. While most therapists have some basic knowledge about an assortment of issues, your best bet is to find someone who has extensive training and experience in treating your specific area of concern. *The more uncommon your reason for seeking counseling, the more important this tip becomes.* As an example, most therapists can fairly competently treat depression, whereas far fewer may have the requisite experience to diagnose or to treat a rare personality disorder.

Worry less about a therapist's gender: As we do in society at large, people tend to seek likeness when selecting a therapist. This manifests in many ways, from racial, cultural, or religious considerations (e.g. seeking a therapist of your own ethnicity or faith), to shared experiences (addicts often prefer to work with clinicians who are, themselves, in recovery), to age and gender similarities. Depending on your reason for seeking therapy, there may be legitimate rationales for choosing a therapist who shares your particular civil or religious affiliations. However, with a few rare exceptions, gender similarity, in my perspective, is not as critical. Much as an oncologist doesn't have to have personally been afflicted with cancer to treat a cancer sufferer competently, a psychologist doesn't have to be of a particular gender to understand issues specific to that gender. In fact, getting the perspective afforded you by someone who's lived "the other side" can often be of tremendous benefit.

Be sure you feel - and understand - rapport: Don't confuse the honest and necessary confrontation that is a vital part of the therapeutic process with "meanness." Therapists aren't your friends, and we're not here simply to sympathize with your plight. It's our job to *empathize*, certainly, but also to help spur change and growth, which doesn't always feel comfortable. That said, the clinician across from you is going to be with you (presumably) for some time, hearing your most intimate concerns and helping you to deal with issues you may not have felt as ease sharing with another living soul. You don't necessarily need to "like" your therapist, but at a minimum you should feel comfortable and confident in that person's ability to hear you and speak to you in a way that feels secure and inspires confidence that change is possible.

- Lance Miller, Psy.D.