

HOW TO SELECT A THERAPIST

Investing in therapy can be one of the greatest gifts you give yourself, but you need to shop around, because there is tremendous variance in quality. Most therapists are good hearted, well meaning people. However, there is a tremendous variance in the levels of technology available today, as well as in the spiritual and personal development of the therapists themselves. While all of the technologies are trying to go in the same direction, some are the equivalent of a horse and buggy, while others are more like a jet plane. Most therapists are drawn to the field because of their own deep traumas and issues, and if they have learned a slower technology, they will likely not have worked through their own issues yet, further limiting their effectiveness. How the therapist IS tends to be more important than what they DO, and if they don't believe this, or if they have fallen in to the many traps such as being overly mental about therapy or trying to heal others instead of themselves, or if they just haven't been able to do their own healing work yet, they will not be very effective.

I recommend trying out a minimum of at least three therapists before selecting one. Frame the first session as a mutual interview, to determine your relative compatibility, and actively probe the therapist in the following areas. Some therapists will offer this type of first interview session free, which I see as a great sign.

The six areas I primarily look for in a terrific therapist are:

1) **Character.** I look for someone who exhibits a sense of deep connectedness, inner peace, empathy, clarity, compassion, and presence. If you look in to their eyes, while you are both sitting quietly, you will ideally feel a deep sense of peace and trust and depth in their eyes. If they haven't done their own work to a very profound level, they will be seriously limited in how far and how well they can guide you. You are looking for maturity, wisdom, and strength of heart. You want to feel that they are doing this because they love serving people, not because it is a job that pays the bills, or worse, an ego trip that lets them hide from their own issues. You are looking for a teacher and a guide who has already walked much of their path, and will lead and inspire you to do the same with yours.

Red Flags: Anger, breaches of integrity, moralistic judgments, a sense that they need you as a client, insecurities, feeling like you aren't safe, or feeling like they are tightly controlling and filtering what they say. This point is less about specific questions, and more about trusting your heart and your gut.

Questions: What does my gut say about this therapist? Do I feel safe with them? Do I trust them? Does my heart sing around them? Is this someone I respect and admire, and would want to spend time with? Try to differentiate any fears that are coming up around the idea of therapy, versus your intuition

about the specific therapist. Ask them questions about their own path, and what brought them to this place.

2) **Acceptance.** One of the most important elements of therapy is acceptance of all that is. It is only once we accept things as they are that we can freely change them. I look for someone who exudes a deep sense of self-acceptance, acceptance of me as a client, and acceptance of what I have gone through in life. While privacy may prevent this coming out in an early session, a great sign is if the therapist displays the self-acceptance to be able to cleanly talk about their own deep issues as if they are no big deal.

Red Flags: Sympathy, encouraging me to see myself as a victim, moralistic judgments, or emotionally charged judgments. With the first therapist I tried out, we did a wave of deep inner child work, and she went in to sympathy for me as a child, and judgment over my father's actions. This alone disqualified her as a candidate therapist for me.

Questions: What are some of the greatest challenges you are working with today? Or, let yourself drop in to a deep victim story, and see how they react. Do they encourage it or provide sympathy? Or, do they accept you for who you are, without judging events in your life as good or bad?

3) **Spiritual Foundation.** I define spirituality as a connection with the piece of me (my heart/soul/spirit) that is most real, as well as a connection with that same piece in all that is (in the Ground of Being, nature, other people, dogs, children, etc.) For me, it has very little to do with a particular religion, beliefs or faith, and everything to do with a way of being, with sitting in the place inside me that is pure light and love, with being grateful for this moment Now, and with living my life in a way that allows me to continue removing the three poisons (judgment, pain, and fear) in my consciousness that innocently keep me from Spirit. It is my experience that the deeper our healing processes become, the closer to Spirit we get. It is also my experience that at the core of myself and all other people, we are better than we can possibly imagine, and it is only our issues that keep us from remembering this. In this way, good therapy is one of the primary tools for spiritual growth. For me, it is essential that my therapist have a deep spiritual connection, and a spiritual maturity where his or her spiritual experience transcends any needs to validate particular beliefs or specific religions. A great sign is a therapist who practices Psychosynthesis, or has integrated the ideas of this therapy in to their practice. An even better sign is a therapist who explicitly works with forgiveness, particularly self-forgiveness. I found my first therapist by doing a web search for Psychosynthesis counselors in my area. Therapy does not need to be explicitly spiritual, as most of the work is done in the mental and emotional levels. However, it is very important that it is an integral part of the therapist's life and models for therapy.

Red Flags: Refusing to talk about spirituality, denial that this dimension is real or important, or dogmatic religious beliefs. Another red flag is if it appears they are in "spiritual bypass", where they are so focused on the spiritual plane, that they have lost their grounding in the earthly plane. This often looks like a

devotion to "woo-woo" stuff, a lack of integration, or denial that they have emotional issues to work on still. For example, a counselor I tried out had developed lots of specific skills to work with spiritual energies, and seemed to have amazing powers in that area, but didn't seem to have any integration between this area and her own cognitive maps of the world, or her own emotional work.

Questions: How do you define spirituality? What is your spirituality? How do you integrate your spirituality in to your therapy? What role do you feel forgiveness plays in therapy? What do you think of Psychosynthesis (by Robert Assagioli)?

4) **Person Centered.** Traditional therapy has defined itself largely along the lines of western medicine. In this model, the therapist is the expert, whose job it is to diagnose what is wrong with the patient, to analyze what pathology they have, and then to use their skills to fix the patient. I find that a much more effective model is the "person centered" approach founded by Carl Rogers. This flips a few key traditional assumptions on their head.

- It is more important how you ARE with a client, that what you DO with the client.
- The client already has all the answers inside themselves, and it is the counselor's job to create a safe and loving space where they can find them.
- The client does not have a pathology, rather a set of learning opportunities for growth, and the counselor's job is to act as a teacher and guide as the client masters these lessons for life.

Red Flags: Feeling like the counselor is "in their head", use of labels like "depression" or "ADD" without great hesitation and many caveats, a tendency towards rapidly advocating psycho-active drugs (drugs are very important for many people, but are also often prescribed to just mask symptoms), or feeling like the counselor is trying to talk more than listen.

Questions: What do you believe are the most important things for you (the therapist) to bring to therapy? Do you think I should also find a psychiatrist to work with? How do you think we can best fix what is wrong with me? (Look for them to reframe this in a way that doesn't paint you as broken)

5) **Experiential.** I have heard many stories from people who went to therapy, and spent years just talking about their problems. The first step of healing is awareness, and simple awareness is often curative, but in a therapeutic context, it is not enough. The full process requires awareness, acceptance, taking personal responsibility, healing of internal wounds, self-forgiveness of internal judgments, and then retraining of habits that no longer serve us. It is very common for therapy to spend all of the time on awareness, and mental level questions about "why" we are how we are. This is a very slow path to healing. There are some extremely powerful experiential technologies available now, for doing the deep healing processes that treat the core issues. These include gestalt (my favorite), guided visualizations, sand tray, EMDR (Eye Movement

Desensitization and Reprocessing), and many more. The goal is to DO deep emotional healing work, not to talk about it. Now, it may take some time to build the awareness first, and establish a safe and trusted relationship, but at some point you have to move on.

Red Flags: If the sessions remain at a purely verbal/mental/analytical level for a number of sessions, or if you get the sense that the therapist is stuck in their head.

Questions: What are the experiential techniques you are experienced with? How much of therapy do you believe should ideally be spent talking between us? What do you see as the key steps in the healing process?

6) Inner Child Work. For most of us, particularly for those of us with challenges that are serious enough to get us to overcome our fears and try therapy, the core of our issues rests in our childhood. This realization was actually one of the original breakthroughs of Freudian therapy. Subsequent developments have let us see that we are not a single "I", but a whole host of sub-personalities, and that most of us have an inner child inside of us, that is very real and alive, but usually very blocked off. Reconnecting with this child, and re-parenting it, is much of the goal of therapy. This can be done implicitly (through psycho-analysis, where the therapist acts as the surrogate parent), or explicitly (where our adult self becomes the new parent) through gestalt, non-dominant hand writing, sand tray, guided visualizations, etc. Look for a therapist who advocates doing explicit inner child work, as it is much more rapid and effective than implicit work, and promotes self-sufficiency and permanent healing. Implicit work is more appropriate for clients with lower levels of functioning, where they aren't ready to parent themselves yet. A fantastic resource for this work is the book *Homecoming*, by John Bradshaw.

Red Flags: Resistance to inner child work, unfamiliarity with it, trying to reframe inner child work in the language of transference and the client/therapist relationship.

Questions: What do you think of inner child work? How important do you think it is? What are the techniques you most use to facilitate it? Will I be learning how to reparent my inner child? How? How important do you feel transference is in therapy? (This is the psycho-analytical term describing how we project our parent issues on the therapist, allowing them to play the part of a surrogate parent...it can be important, but I would shy away from therapists who think it is the main goal).

These guidelines are based on my experiences, and clearly reflect my biases. In particular, they reflect my assumption that the client is not suffering from a serious biologically based condition, and has developed a fairly high level of competence already. They are targeted at high-functioning adults who are ready to take the next step in their life's journey by doing the deep healing work which will bring them more in touch with who they really are.

In my experience, there are not yet a lot of therapists out there who meet all of these criteria, but the criteria do tend to be highly correlated, so that if you find someone who really meets a couple of them, they will hopefully meet most or all of them.

I wish you growth, learning, joy, and love as you travel your path, and hope my experience can be of some service to you as you make the hero's journey.

Love and light,
Brian