How to find a therapist [1]

Dear Alice,

I am trying to find a therapist. I have to go in-network for my health insurance to cover it, so I have this long list of therapists, but I don't know anything about them. Do you have any suggestions as to how to go about choosing one and/or questions to ask? Is there a "Go Ask Alice!" answer I could read for this info? I found my last therapist through the recommendation of a colleague at work and another through my school's counseling service. Now I need to spread my wings and find a professional therapist on my own! Yikes!

Thanks for any help you can give me!!!!!!!!!!

Answer

Dear Reader,

Dedicating time to explore your thoughts and feelings with the help of a professional can be rewarding. The process of finding someone who is a good match for you, however, may be daunting. Just as you may not like or connect with everyone you meet at work, or at a party, the same can be true for first encounters with therapists. Given the nature of a therapeutic relationship, it makes sense to devote energy to this process so that you can feel confident and comfortable as you embark on your work together.

In the Emotional Health [2] section of the Go Ask Alice! archives, you can find lots of information that might help you refine your sense of the issues you'd like to explore with a therapist. Although this might change over time, it can often be helpful to talk over some of your ideas with the potential counselors you meet. In addition, Finding low-cost counseling [3] has a brief list of things to consider when you meet potentials, with a focus on low-cost counseling options. This might be useful in case you decide to pay out-of-pocket or just want a longer list of therapists to try out. Also, on-line, you can often learn about a clinician's background, education, and special areas of expertise, as well as prepare for an initial interview.

Otherwise, an in-person meeting can be invaluable in helping you choose a therapist or counselor; here are some things to ask about:

- Where did the therapists/counselors receive their training? Are they certified or credentialed by any professional programs or associations? (Help when therapy boundaries are violated [4] has more information about this.)
What kind of approach do they use? They may cite a specific "school," such as cognitive therapy, behavioral modification, psychoanalysis, etc. Then you can ask what the approach looks like in a typical session and over the course of the work you'll do together.

Whether or not, or to what degree, the therapist has experience working with the issues you'll want to discuss, especially if that doesn't become clear simply from the conversation.

The charge for an assessment/initial interview, and if it is the same as the regular fees.

Their availability and scheduling possibilities.

Their policies on canceling or rescheduling an appointment.

Their emergency protocol; for example, when you can't get to an appointment or in case you need to speak with someone right away.

Their (and your) vacation arrangements.

Whether your potential counselor runs groups. Groups are usually less expensive than individual counseling and can be a great complement to one-on-one work. This can be for future reference even if you're not interested right now.

Listen to your intuition as you speak with potential therapists on the phone or in-person. Do you feel supported? Listened to? Comfortable speaking honestly? Are the surroundings of the office (the waiting area, neighborhood, entrance, paintings/furniture in the individual office space) putting you at ease or not quite right for you? This may sound inconsequential, but it can affect your experience. Do you feel there is a good sense of privacy in the office space(s)?

In addition, you can find out from your insurance company what the maximum number of visits or monetary coverage is for the year, and also "per lifetime" (the duration of your coverage under that insurance plan). You may decide only to submit some of your actual visits, or opt for an adjusted or sliding scale price, instead of using your insurance coverage. Sometimes such an arrangement works out to be less expensive, and even more private.

Remember, you are collecting information to assess if this person is going to meet your needs and be a good person to facilitate your process. You are paying him or her, too! You may feel intimidated or awkward asking questions, but ask away! If the person makes you feel uncomfortable, try out someone else. Many compassionate and skilled counselors are out there. With some effort, you can find someone with whom you can develop a meaningful working relationship.

Good luck,

Alice!

Category:
Emotional Health [2]
Counseling [5]

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Resources

Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) (Morningside)
Mental Health Service (CUMC)
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