

CHOOSING A PSYCHOLOGIST: ESSENTIALS

In looking for a psychologist, it is best to have a personal referral from someone you trust. This way, you feel more confident going in. This is not always possible, but even when it is, the client still needs to assess for him or herself if the match is good. So, to this end....

It is important to feel a genuine concern and that you are being understood—that the therapist is hearing your experience and not asking you to conform to his or her perspective or theory.

Do you feel appropriately safe and at ease with this person? Or, since going to therapy can be stressful in itself, can you say that the therapist is not unnecessarily increasing your anxiety? Does she or he seem relaxed?

Does the therapist appear to be competent? His or her comments should not be cliché, superficial, judgmental, or come from an unusual or unconventional perspective—unless you are knowingly seeking a specific type of psychotherapy. You have the right to ask about the therapist's experience with your type of concern, and to ask about training and licensing, if this seems necessary. Most psychologists will have their credentials in plain view.

Does she or he show respect by being on time and by listening to you without interruption (or by explaining the need to interrupt)? Does the therapist explain all the procedures involved, such as payment, cancellation, regularity of appointments, etc.?

Do you feel that the therapist has your well-being in mind and does not let his or her own needs or concerns intrude into your treatment? Does she or he respect and not demean the ways you have tried to cope, regardless of their effectiveness? Can the therapist hear your criticism or anger without becoming defensive and without attacking you in return?

During the first sessions, is your therapist helping you to understand your needs and goals so that they can be used to gauge your progress?

Over time, do you feel, even though it might not be comfortable, that your therapist is providing insight—that is, a new, relevant perspective—to your dilemma? Do you find your life is becoming less chaotic, more rewarding? Are you moving toward your goals?

Unless one has a strong response to the therapist in the first session, it is usually best to attend for a few sessions before deciding to stay or leave. Remember that you have no obligation to see this person and can stop at any time. The therapist's feelings are not the focus here. If you plan not to return or continue, it is best to share your reasons before making a final decision-- so that both of you can learn from this experience.