

CHOOSING A THERAPIST

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Consumer Rights

When you look for a therapist, consider yourself a consumer, seeking to make an informed choice about the person you will hire to work with you. Regardless of your reasons for seeking therapy, you are still paying for a service. As a consumer, you possess certain rights, including:

- ❖ The right to determine the qualities you want in your therapist
- ❖ The right to be heard, believed and treated with respect
- ❖ The right to say “no” to any of your therapist’s suggestions
- ❖ The right to freely discuss with your therapist any problems that arise in therapy
- ❖ The right to be satisfied by the services you receive
- ❖ The right to end a therapy relationship if it is not working for you

Choosing a Therapist

In California, individuals with a number of different credentials may be licensed to practice psychotherapy. The most common are psychiatrists, psychologists, clinical social workers, marriage and family counselors, and pastoral counselors. The duration and the nature of formal education and clinical training required to be licensed varies among these professional classifications. Psychiatrists, who are physicians, are the only group who can prescribe and monitor medications.

Although a therapist’s academic degree or professional credentials may be an indicator of minimal professional competence, more does not always mean better (though it does generally mean more expensive). It is important that your therapist have knowledge and experience with the types of problems or concerns which you bring to him or her. But it’s equally important that your therapist be a person with whom you feel comfortable and safe.

It is sometimes a good idea to talk with at least two different therapists before deciding to work with someone. After an initial meeting with a therapist, take some time to reflect upon the experience and your reactions: Ask yourself:

- ❖ What things did I like and not like about the session?
- ❖ How comfortable and safe did I feel talking with this person?
- ❖ Were all my initial questions and concerns adequately addressed?
- ❖ Do I think the therapist will be able to help me?
- ❖ Do I want to see this therapist again?

Paying for Therapy

Ongoing psychotherapy can be expensive. When you contact a therapist, feel free to ask questions about his or her fees and be sure you understand how payment is to be handled. Some therapists will give you a bill to submit to your insurance company, but will expect to be paid directly by you at the end of each session.

Be sure to review your insurance coverage before beginning therapy. Policies vary tremendously along a number of different dimensions: how much they will reimburse for each session, the total amount they will pay during a coverage period, and the credentials your therapist must have in order to be reimbursed. Some policies identify “preferred providers” in your area who are reimbursed at a higher rate than other mental health providers. Also be aware that your insurance company will reimburse treatment costs only if the nature of the mental health condition you are being treated for has been disclosed to it by your therapist. Feel free to ask your therapist what specific information about you will be given to the insurance company.

Handling Ups and Downs in Therapy

Although people go to a therapist in order to feel better, the work they do in therapy is often difficult and painful at times. You may experience feelings of intense fear, sadness, anger, guilt, shame, and even love as you work with your therapist. The presence of these feelings can make therapy confusing or frustrating. At such times it is often helpful to discuss your feelings about therapy with your therapist. Feel free to ask questions and expect comprehensible responses. Usually, a candid discussion about what is happening in therapy can resolve much of the confusion or frustration.

In the unlikely event that your therapist does something that feels extremely inappropriate or harmful (such as verbal abuse, unwanted intrusive physical contact, or sexual advances), you may contact one of the following state licensing boards to discuss the situation or file a complaint:

Board of Behavioral Science Examiners
916.574.7830

Medical Board of California
916.263.2382

Board of Psychology
916.263.2699