

CHOOSING A PSYCHOTHERAPIST AND BEING IN TREATMENT

(Adapted from my manuscript, *Failed Parental Love and the Lost Self*)

Opening up to a total stranger and revealing some of your most intimate thoughts and feelings—things that perhaps you have never told anyone—is not easy for many people. In what follows, I offer some guidance in how to choose a counselor or psychotherapist, and I talk about what you may experience during treatment itself. Knowing what to look for in a treatment provider, and what to expect in treatment, may help you feel better prepared to take that first step in asking for help.

Word of mouth recommendations are often a good starting point in choosing a therapist. You can also find information about therapists on their websites or you can visit the website of your local psychological association to see if it has a referral service. How glitzy or professional the website of a therapist looks may not be an indication of their effectiveness. Read the information on the therapist's website and see if it fits for you. If questions come to mind, you can jot them down and ask the therapist for clarification when you phone him or her. Once you have a short list, you can proceed from there to contact these individuals.

When you contact the therapist for the first time, “interview” him or her on the phone. Often those who have a busy practice will not be immediately reachable, so leave a short message, indicating when you can be reached. If you do not get a call back within a few days, it may be a sign that the provider is too busy or not interested or just plain disorganized. If you find that the therapist does not seem to have the time to personally speak to you on the phone, this may be an indication that this person will be inaccessible and not attuned to your needs. However, before

eliminating this person from your list, you could attend the first session, and do your “interview” at that time to determine if you are comfortable with this person. However, start first with those therapists that are more accessible.

Think of the phone interview as a kind of job interview. You are the one who does the hiring and firing. A ten minute interview will usually be sufficient. You want to find out what experience and training the therapist has, what type of problems the person treats, and what the cost of the treatment sessions will be. Also, ask the therapist how much experience he or she has in treating *your specific kind of problem, and what treatment approach the therapist would use and why.*

Since the therapist knows little about you at this stage, do not expect a detailed answer, but he or she should be able to make some general comments about treatment. What you are looking for in the therapist’s response is clarity in his or her way of explaining things to you. While listening to the answer, ask yourself, is this a person I would feel comfortable with? If the therapist does not seem sure of himself or herself in answering questions, you may want to seek help elsewhere.

Most important is how you *feel* about the therapist while talking to him or her. Go with your gut feelings. Take mental note of whether the therapist is listening or trying to brush you off. Does the therapist sound empathic or gruff and pushy? Does he or she seem too rushed, or confusing, or anxious or irritable? If you feel fairly comfortable with the person on the phone, this is a good sign. In the phone conversation, do not get into an involved discussion of your problem—just give a brief summary. If you think you have found the right person, make an appointment. If it turns out later you were mistaken with your choice, you have the right to go elsewhere.

There are hundreds of different types of psychotherapies out there, and some have been more researched than others. More established psychotherapy approaches include cognitive-behavioral therapy, exposure therapy, EMDR, stress inoculation training, problem-solving therapy, emotion focused therapy for couples, interpersonal psychotherapy, acceptance and commitment therapy, dialectical behavior therapy, and psychodynamic psychotherapy, among others. When choosing a psychotherapist, how he or she relates as a person can be as important, if not more important, than the treatment approach.

There has been a growing realization and acceptance, based on accumulating research, that what accounts for change in psychotherapy is *not primarily the model or technique used*, but other factors that are common to all treatment approaches.¹ One important factor that has been found to be predictive of treatment outcome in numerous studies is the quality of the therapist-client working relationship, or what is called the “alliance.”²

When the client and therapist are working together toward a common goal, and the therapist is sensitive and responsive to the emotional experiences of the client, the likelihood that the client will improve is significantly enhanced, regardless of the specific technique that is used. Better treatment outcome is associated with therapists who were viewed as more empathic, open, and caring by clients. The therapeutic alliance has been found to be related to treatment outcome even for patients treated with medications.³

Not all therapists are alike in their ability to help clients get better. Some therapists get superior results in most of their cases compared to other therapists.⁴ In one study of 581 providers, it was found that clients of the best therapists improved at a rate of at least 50 percent higher than those

treated by the worst clinicians.⁵ The effective therapists, the “supershrinks” are actively attuned to and engaged with the client to ensure there is a good working alliance. They are continually sensitive to how the client is responding to treatment, and seek feedback from the client about their approach and adjust their treatment accordingly.⁶

The therapist who will be your special guide should be someone who listens, shows empathy, responds to your emotional needs as a client, actively seeks feedback from you about how you feel the treatment sessions are going, and shows flexibility in adjusting the treatment approach to ensure you are benefiting. The therapist should be willing to admit mistakes, or apologize, if required, thus giving you the experience of a healthy relationship in which feelings can be openly discussed, while still valuing each other. Your therapist provides you with ways to develop a more emotionally fulfilling approach to relating to your world. When a person is distressed, it is often difficult to see the forest for the trees. One can end up wandering aimlessly in circles. The therapist helps you climb up high into a tall tree, where you can see the road that leads you out of your entrapped existence.

During treatment, it is important that you monitor how you are doing. Ask yourself if treatment is helping or hindering. If something is bothering you about the treatment, discuss this with the treatment provider. If you find that treatment is not progressing, or the working relationship is lacking something, and the therapist has not been able to meet your treatment needs, you may want consider seeing someone else.

Certainly you should leave treatment if your therapist is abusive, unreliable, or untrustworthy. Go with your gut feeling. But be honest with yourself. If you tend to be highly sensitive to hurt

and rejection, ask yourself if your urge to discontinue treatment is just an escape from painful emotions. If a misunderstanding occurs between you and your therapist, remember, we are all human, and even therapists make mistakes. See if you can approach the misunderstanding as an opportunity to deal with conflict in a mutually respectful way, without feeling you have to hide your inner self.

There will be times in treatment when you may feel uncomfortable or more anxious discussing things that are difficult for you to talk about, and this is normal. There will be times when you try out new behaviors or ways of relating to others that arouse feelings of frustration, or discomfort or vulnerability. This is also normal, for learning new ways of interacting with your world is not easy and takes practice. Throughout treatment, however, it is important that your therapist relates to you in a genuine, caring way, and that he or she provides a supportive setting in which you can take tolerable risks in experiencing yourself in a new, more satisfying way.

¹ Hubble et al. *The Heart and Soul of Change* (2008)

² Scovern, From placebo to alliance: The role of common factors in medicine. (2008)

³ Blatt, et al. Interpersonal factors in brief treatment of depression: Further analyses of the NIMH Treatment of Depression Collaborative Research Program. (1996), and Krupnick et al. The role of the therapeutic alliance in psychotherapy and pharmacotherapy outcome: Findings in the National Institute of Mental Health Treatment of Depression Collaborative Research Program. (1996)

⁴ Duncan et al. How being bad can make you better. (2007)

⁵ Wampold & Brown, Estimating variability in outcomes attributable to therapists: A naturalistic study of outcomes in managed care. (2005)

⁶ Miller et al. *Supershrinks* (2007)