

## HOW TO FIND A COUNSELOR WHO IS RIGHT FOR YOUR NEEDS

Choosing a counselor to help you resolve your issues is a very personal decision. For many, finding the right person who can help you work through tough decisions, discover new strengths, resolve old hurts is a daunting task. There is no sure-fire path to finding that counselor, but this guide might reduce some of the anxiety and frustrations.

There are 3 basic things to know about the counselor you choose:

- A good counselor is nonjudgmental, accepting, and patient. Otherwise, you are just getting what you grew up with.
- Changing habits, ways of being, is difficult, otherwise, you would have accomplished this without help. A good counselor provides accountability as well as encouragement.
- A counselor does not need decades of experience -- or a sheepskin from an ivy-league school -- to be helpful. Other qualities are more important.

### WHERE DO I START?

A little prep can save you time. Before you start calling prospective professionals, consider your financial options for counseling. There are several options for paying for counseling. Let's look at two of them.

### IF YOU WANT TO USE INSURANCE

The primary advantage of using insurance is that you pay lower out-of-pocket costs. What might not be affordable is made affordable. Another advantage is that the insurance company provides oversight of the counselor's treatment and your progress. Is the treatment plan appropriate to your diagnosis? This is somewhat controversial, but it can afford some protections from potential counselor abuse.

If you want to use your insurance, learn about benefits allowed for your mental health plan. Every insurance plan has a stated in-network and out-of-network benefit schedule. Call the phone number on the back of your card and ask the representative to explain your benefits. Have this information handy as you search for a counselor. Then gather a list of professionals to call by:

- Collect Names. "Don't start with just three names from your insurance company. Insist on getting the whole provider list for your geographic area. Then ask friends and colleagues if they know a psychologist or psychiatrist who could make recommendations from that list."
- If you're moving to a new city, ask your current counselor for referrals, or have him/her check with colleagues.
- Check with friends and family. Is there a mental health professional that they've used in the past?

### SELF-PAY

Even if you have mental health insurance, you may want to consider private pay. Advantages of self-pay include protection from others (including the insurance company) abusing the knowledge of your treatment. With insurance, the counselor is required to give an "accurate diagnosis" in order to get reimbursed by the insurance company. Why might this be bad for you? Once you are given a diagnosis, you have that diagnosis for the remainder of your life. For example, if you are diagnosed with major depression or brief psychotic episode from smoking bad weed, even if life gets better for you, the diagnosis remains on record—forever. Another advantage: Cash talks. Meaning you are not limited to choosing a counselor who takes your insurance. You are free to work with the professional who is truly *your best fit*.

The disadvantage of self-pay is higher cost for care. Some counselors offer a sliding scale for cash clients. You may be able negotiate a slightly lower fee if you can justify the need for it (Bear in mind, like you, counselors have bills to pay.) With insurance, there is no sliding scale because the lower fee has already been negotiated by the insurance company. Moreover, by contract, the insurance company *requires* that the counselor collect the full co-pay or co-insurance.

## FIRST CONTACT

Some counselors offer free phone consultation for new clients. This gives you the opportunity to find out more about the counselor, get a sense of how they relate to clients without the monetary or time commitment of an hour-long session. Call their office and find out if you can speak with the counselor for a 15-minute phone consult. I offer potential clients to conveniently schedule a free consult on my website: [www.sgcounseling.org](http://www.sgcounseling.org).

## INTERVIEWING THE COUNSELOR

I provide a brief form for questions you might ask, below. Here, I provide more detailed explanation of the purpose of those questions.

- **How long has the counselor been in practice?**
  - This should not be a 'deal breaker' for someone recently licensed. However, it can be a factor in the final choice.
- **How many clients has the counselor worked with who have your type of problem/diagnosis?**
  - If you spend much time looking at some counselors' websites, you'd think that they are experts in 'all problems mental.' Truth is while we may have some experience at 30-50 different mental health issues or life problems, none are likely to be an expert in all of them. More likely, we have 2-4 niches that we are really good at providing. So you want to know—is that counselor REALLY experienced with dealing with your specific issues?
- **What were the outcomes of those clients they worked with?**
  - Obviously, you are looking for someone who has successfully helped others with similar problems.
- **How often do they meet with clients for therapy?**
  - Most commonly, counselors recommend starting with weekly sessions and as progress is made towards goals, the frequency tapers. The first 4-6 sessions generally focus on learning about you, helping you get comfortable with them as your counselor, and learning more deeply about your concerns, what environmental or social influences may have contributed to the problem. All this information helps the counselor design a treatment plan for your work in therapy. If clients attend sessions only once or twice a month, they don't make as much progress between sessions and often become discouraged that therapy is not working. My own experience with weekly vs. biweekly sessions: by the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> session, the weekly clients had moved closer to their goals than the bi-weekly clients, session for session. If your life is full of drama and pain and you want quicker relief, attend sessions weekly. For some clients, I ask that we meet twice a week to start, primarily because they are in crisis, often coming out of a hospital and need more intensive support to stabilize their emotions and behaviors.
- **What are their office cancellation policies, fees, payments?** –but don't bargain hunt for mental health care. It's too important. Consider counseling both in time and money as an investment in yourself.
- **If you are interested in a specific type of therapy, ask about their credentials or specialized training.**
  - In my state (Texas) counselors must be professional, licensed by the state, be formally trained or credentialed for any specialized treatment, and competent, with no lawsuits against them.
- **Ask yourself: Do I feel reasonably OK with this person?**
  - Feeling totally comfortable isn't the best criteria, because if you're too comfortable, you're just chit chatting, and that doesn't help you.
  - Is the counselor really listening to me? Is he or she asking enough questions? Especially in the first sessions, the counselor should be asking many questions, to become acquainted with you and the issues you are dealing with.

They must be an intuitive fit -- you can't underestimate the absolute value of feeling a good intuitive match with somebody. If you ask them questions about their professional history, and they get defensive, go somewhere else.

- **Has the counselor asked what outcome you want from therapy?**
  - How you want your life to be after counseling ends? How will you know when you get there, if neither the client nor the counselor has established a goal? This question is important for developing the treatment plan. I give my clients homework at the first session to find out what they want to see different in their lives after counseling and to help clarify their level of commitment to do the work to get there. I use one of two types of questions: “personal intention” and “counseling outcomes.” Sometimes, these goals change, but if they stay consistent, you know when you’re getting “off track” and can make corrections.
- **Do you feel satisfied with the counselor's resources?**
  - For example, do you have to find your own therapy group? Or is your counselor checking with colleagues about a group appropriate for you?
  - A really great counselor has all the above qualities, plus, they advocate for your needs through a referral network. If you need other forms of help, such as job search or help with housing, do they have referral resources to help you get appropriate help?
- **Does what the counselor say make sense? Does it seem like bad advice? Does it help you or not?**
  - This is again something intuitive for you to discern. You may not get a solid feel for this on the phone consult, but should be able to discern it by the end of session 1.
- **Do they offer appointment times/services that accommodate your other life priorities?**
  - If your schedule at work or home is limited, ask if they offer appointments on particular days or times of the day that would work for you.
  - If you travel in your work, do they offer telehealth sessions? Telehealth sessions use a secure internet or phone connection in order to conduct a session when you cannot meet face-to-face. Make sure if you are using insurance that your plan covers telehealth services; otherwise, you must self-pay.
- **What features or services do they offer clients for convenience?**
  - For example, some counselors provide a secure portal for setting, changing and cancelling appointments. Some offer a portal where paperwork can be completed outside the session time. This is especially useful to speed up the initial session with the counselor. You’re not paying them for you to complete required paperwork. The portal can also provide a means of secure, private communication between you and your counselor.
- **Suppose the counselor is “not a good fit.” Still ask, given what you’ve shared with them, if they know someone that fits the description for what you are looking for in a counselor.**
  - Understand you’re not concluding that this counselor is a bad counselor or that you’re a hopeless client; you just don’t fit together. You may need someone who takes your insurance. You simply cannot afford the self-pay rate that counselor charges. Another example may include a counselor who treats individuals, but not couples and you are looking for couples’ therapy. A third example is one I get a lot. Callers will ask me if I will see their teen who is struggling with drug abuse. Yeah, I am as a licensed chemical dependency counselor so I’m qualified to work with all kinds of substance abuse, but I see only adults. Not a good fit.

From the answers you get, you should have a pretty good idea if you want to take the next step and schedule that first session. Good luck on your search!

### CHOOSING A COUNSELOR WORKSHEET

Does the counselor accept my insurance (i.e. in-network)  Yes  No

Does the counselor offer sliding scale (if out-of-network)  Yes  No

What is the session fee for 45 or 60 minutes \$ \_\_\_\_\_

What forms of payment are accepted?  Cash  Credit/Debit Card  Check  HSA/FSA

How long have you been in practice? \_\_\_\_\_

How many clients have you worked with who have my type of problem/diagnosis? \_\_\_\_\_

What were the outcomes of those clients \_\_\_\_\_

How often do they meet with clients for therapy? \_\_\_\_\_

What are your office cancellation policies, fees, payments? \_\_\_\_\_

Does the counselor offer appointment times that can fit my schedule?  Yes  No

### OPTIONAL QUESTIONS

Credentials or specialized training, if appropriate \_\_\_\_\_

On a scale of 1-10, Do I feel reasonably OK with this person? 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Is the counselor really listening to me? Is he or she asking enough questions?  Yes  No  Not Sure

Do you feel satisfied with the counselor's resources?  Yes  No  Somewhat

Do they offer telehealth services?  Yes  No

Did he/she ask what outcome I want from therapy  Yes  No

Has the counselor ever been reprimanded or fined for professional misconduct? If yes, when? Are they still under supervision for it?  Yes  No

If yes, describe the issue \_\_\_\_\_