

How to Choose a Counselor By Bruce Johns, Ph.D.

A friend recently asked me, “How did you end up becoming a psychologist? You seem so normal.” There’s room to question the accuracy of his perceptions—on both counts, but he’s definitely not alone in his misgivings about psychotherapists... maybe with good reason. Even the father of psychotherapy, Sigmund Freud, was highly superstitious, a self-proclaimed neurotic, agoraphobic, and was, for a time, addicted to cocaine—hardly the picture of emotional health. My friend asked, “Don’t you think a lot of your colleagues have entered the field so they can better understand and heal themselves?” I think that’s true. I discovered, early on, that my mentors, colleagues, and I all had feet of clay—we’re unalterably human. Yet despite the clay, psychotherapy continues to be effective in treating many conditions. In a Consumer Reports study, of 1,212 people who felt poorly or very poorly prior to therapy, 90% reported feeling okay, good, or very good following therapy.

So imagine, for a moment, that you, or someone you love, needs a therapist. You open the phone book to “Counselors,” see a bunch of names, and have no idea how to proceed from there. Since one size probably doesn’t fit all, how do you sort through them to find a good fit? Here are some tips:

1. Ask around. People who glean information from websites and seek recommendations from people they know and trust, tend to have better outcomes than those who select a therapist by pulling a name out of the yellow pages.
2. Look for a licensed clinician with experience (not just training) in what you need help with. But don’t put too much stock in degrees. Research says it makes little difference, to therapeutic outcome, whether you see a psychologist, social worker, or psychiatrist.
3. The scalpel is not more important than the surgeon. Dr. Bruce Wampold, author of *The Great Psychotherapy Debate*, says the characteristics and skill of the therapist are much more important to the final results than the therapeutic model used. Good therapists will tailor their approach and techniques to you and your needs. Look for one with whom you connect, whom you feel you can trust. This is largely a gut-feel. Avoid anyone who seems more focused on himself than on you. If you’re not comfortable, for some reason, move on.
4. Look for a therapist who can comfort *AND HELP YOU STRETCH*. Therapy should be supportive, but not always comfortable. A good counselor empathizes, but also points out when something’s not working well, then celebrates with you when you make headway.
5. Expect progress. You need to be on the same page regarding therapeutic goals. What will progress look like? Significant advancement should occur within the first six sessions. That doesn’t mean therapy would be complete, but if you’re working well together, you can expect movement.

6. Don't be anxious to quit when you start feeling better. Studies say wherever you are, when your therapy ends, is where you're likely to be 2-3 years later. Nevertheless, when you feel satisfied with what you've attained, it's okay to cut back, then stop. Good therapists help clients get on a good path. They don't insist on accompanying them to the end of their roads. But once you've moved on, just like Motel 6, we'll still leave the light on for you.