



*An affiliate of the  
American Psychological  
Association*

# PENNSYLVANIA PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

416 Forster Street • Harrisburg, Pennsylvania 17102-1748 • Telephone 717-232-3817 • Fax 717-232-7294  
<http://www.papsy.org>

## **How Do I Know If I've Found A Good Psychotherapist?**

***By Richard P. Johnson, Ph.D.***

Most people seeking psychotherapy choose a therapist when they are experiencing a crisis or when they have difficulty controlling their emotions. This complicates the process of selecting a good therapist match even more than it might be without such stress.

Getting a recommendation from a friend or colleague may seem like a good idea, but often, people don't want to share this need except with those closest to them. And those closest to them may not know any more about selecting a good therapist than they know themselves. Recommendations from a primary care physician can be helpful, but their physician group may be connected to an HMO that requires them to refer to a specific person or group.

Further complicating matters is the variety of providers of psychotherapy. Knowing which type of therapist is the most appropriate for a given problem is something most people don't know. Psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, counselors, or other types of therapists all include a large number of qualified individuals to provide the services needed. And anyone of them that is licensed by the state in which they practice must meet certain minimum standards of training and knowledge. Yet, the process of selecting the right therapist is still a mystery to many people.

Here are some suggestions that might help to select a therapist that will best meet your psychotherapy needs:

- 1) Ask about the professional organizations to which the therapist belongs. Most reputable therapists will belong to one or more organizations that govern the ethics of practice for their profession.
- 2) Ask if the therapist will give you a few minutes (ten or less) on the phone to discuss the way they practice psychotherapy. The therapist's philosophy of counseling and their approach to helping clients can be an important factor in selecting a therapist that is a good match.
- 3) At the time of the initial interview, ask if the therapist can help you establish both short- and long-term goals for psychotherapy. Psychotherapy without goals is similar to taking a road trip without knowing a destination. You might never arrive at the right place. At

least, you'll never know when you do arrive unless you have specific and measurable goals.

- 4) Ask about fees, referrals needed to begin the therapy process, and authorizations that you must obtain before beginning treatment. If you have a mental health insurance benefit that you want to use, be sure you have followed all of the requirements of that particular health plan, or you could be responsible for payment of all fees. The individual or organization you select should know about the approvals you must obtain prior to the beginning of treatment, **but it remains your responsibility to ensure you have followed the procedures required by your insurance company if you wish to utilize your insurance benefit.**
- 5) Be as open and honest as you can be about what you need from therapy. Having "hidden agendas" in therapy will only hamper your progress and make it more difficult to determine if your therapist will be helpful.
- 6) Perhaps most important is this: **If you don't feel as if you have a connection with your therapist by the end of the first forty-five to fifty minute interview, don't continue to pursue the therapy relationship.** The reasons for the lack of a connection aren't your fault and they aren't the fault of the therapist. Sometimes, it just isn't a good match. And with psychotherapy, the relationship is what it is all about. So ask for a referral to another therapist.

***Talk to someone who can help.*** If you would like the name of a qualified psychologist in your area, please try our Psychologist Locator.