

A Lawyer's Guide to Choosing a Mental Health Professional

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Choosing a therapist is an important skill. This article is intended to give you some background information that should help when you are interviewing or meeting with a therapist for the first time. We all create a list of professionals to whom we refer our friends and colleagues. In much the same way, finding a therapist is commonly done by word of mouth. However, it is still important to develop a list of criteria and questions to ask when looking for a therapist. This article is intended to demystify some of how to find and pick a therapist.

What is a therapist? Therapists, counselors, psychologists, or psychiatrists are all mental health professionals who can help you to develop insight and awareness into bothersome thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. These professionals can also help with stress management, relationships challenges, the effects of living with mental illness, and much more.

Being selective in your choice of therapist will help you get the most out of your time in therapy. It is important to choose a therapist who has strong academic and professional credentials as well as training in interpersonal skills so that you can develop trust in the therapeutic relationship and meet your needs and goals.

What Should I Consider When Choosing a Mental Health Professional?

Licensure: There are many types of mental health professionals, all with different levels of education, licensing, and certification. Just as it is important for attorneys to be licensed, therapists also have licensing requirements which typically include annual training requirements in order to maintain licensure – just like attorneys must have CLEs each year. Additionally, just as with lawyers, having a degree and licensure in counseling is typically the starting point for being able to practice. Most attorneys specialize in a particular area of law and become more fluent and skilled in that practice. Similarly, counselors can be specialized in areas such as grief, post-traumatic stress disorder, and depression amongst other specializations.

It is reasonable to ask any potential counselors about their training, clinical background, experience, and license. Just as your clients want to know your legal experience and expertise, you want to know that the mental health professional you will be meeting with has the skills and experience to meet your needs.

Here is a brief summary of some of the counseling licensures:

- **LPC:** This stands for licensed professional counselor. LPCs are licensed by the state and generally, this person must hold a master's degree, complete a certain number of post-degree training hours under supervision, and pass a licensure exam.
- **LCSW:** This stands for licensed clinical social worker. LCSWs are licensed by the state, hold a master's degree in social work, complete a certain number of post-degree training hours under supervision, and pass a licensure exam.
- **LMFT:** This stands for licensed marriage and family therapist.

- LCDC: This stands for licensed chemical dependency counselor. These counselors are required to have 270 educational hours in the specific dynamics of addiction and chemical dependency treatment as well as 300 hours of supervised practicum training.
- PhD: A person with a PhD holds a doctorate degree and for practicing mental health, the degree should be in the field of psychology. In most cases, a doctoral degree reflects a minimum of four or five years of post-bachelor's study. The national average is seven years of study.
- MD: A person with an MD has completed medical school and holds a doctorate in medicine. People offering mental health services should have completed a residency in psychiatry and be a board-certified psychiatrist. Most psychiatrists prescribe medication as part of their practice. Some limit themselves to medication-related issues. But some do also offer talk therapy.

Specialty: Most therapists have a variety of tools that they use with clients, while some have a specialization or advanced training in a particular therapeutic technique.

Below are some popular modalities practiced by professionals:

1. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is an empirically supported psychological treatment that has been demonstrated to be effective for a range of problems including depression, anxiety disorders, alcohol and drug use problems, marital problems, eating disorders, and severe mental illness. Numerous research studies suggest that CBT leads to significant improvement in functioning and quality of life. CBT focuses on teaching people to identify and change unhelpful, negative thought patterns.
2. Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), a subset of CBT, is another empirically supported treatment that seems ideal for attorneys dealing with trauma related symptoms. It involves individual or group session in which the client focuses on skills training for effective problem-solving and actions. Lawyers are excellent learners and this modality provides many easy to learn tools for handling common difficulties in relationships and in confrontational circumstances often faced by attorneys in practice.
3. EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing) is another kind of psychotherapy that enables people to become desensitized to past trauma and heal from the symptoms and emotional distress that are the result of disturbing life experiences. Repeated studies show that by using EMDR therapy people can experience the benefits of psychotherapy that once took years to make a difference.¹ EMDR therapy helps to rewire the traumatic memory network so that traumatic events are desensitized, and new associations are created between the traumatic memory and more complete information. These new associations allow processing and the elimination of emotional distress.

¹ See <http://www.emdr.com/what-is-emdr/>

Each therapeutic approach has its time and place. What is important is that a therapist's specialization is evidence-based and helps you achieve the goals you have identified for the counseling.

Cost and Insurance Coverage: Financial considerations are important when choosing a therapist. It is perfectly reasonable to ask about fees, insurance coverage, out-of-pocket costs, and the costs of cancellations.

Scheduling: Practical considerations such as office location, teletherapy, online counseling and scheduling flexibility are important when selecting a therapist. The therapist must see clients at the times that you are available. Video sessions have become more widespread over the last 2 years as a result of the pandemic and research shows that online therapy is essentially equal to in-person therapy in effectiveness.²

Other Considerations: In addition to the factors mentioned above, it is also important to consider your age, gender, sexual orientation, religion, race and ethnicity, and cultural background, as well as that of the therapist, when choosing. Asking the therapist about their experience and comfort working with people like you can help you identify whether the therapist will be a good fit. Ask yourself if you would feel comfortable talking about your private matters with someone of a different background.

Medication: The providers who can prescribe medication for depression, anxiety, and other mental health challenges are psychiatrists, medical doctors, nurse practitioners and physician assistants. Most therapists work with professionals that they can refer you to if the need for medication arises.

Initial Consultation or Phone Call: Many mental health professionals will schedule a brief (typically 15 minutes) call to discuss some of the basic questions outlined above. This is the time to get your most important questions answered and try to determine if you want to move forward with setting up an appointment.

Lawyer Recommended Therapists: Finally, please know that TLAP has a list of lawyer recommended mental health professionals, including therapists, counselors, psychologists, and psychiatrists across the state. We are happy to help you with finding a mental health professional in your area who can address the issues you want to focus on.

I hope that the information in this article helps you to become a better consumer of counseling and therapeutic services.

² Morin, A. (2019). Does online therapy work? *Psychology Today*. Retrieved from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/what-mentally-strong-people-dont-do/201911/does-online-therapy-work>