

HOW TO FIND A THERAPIST[©]

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ASK SOMEONE TO HELP YOU GATHER RECOMMENDATIONS

Oftentimes, people feel overwhelmed by the weight of their personal crisis or depression to seek professional help or to utilize other support systems on their own. Asking (or accepting the offer of) a family member, friend or other trusted individual to help you gather information and recommendations can be very useful.

IF YOU DECIDE TO FIND A THERAPIST ON YOUR OWN:

- **Familiarize yourself with your insurance** benefits and mental health coverage.
- **Interview prospective therapists.** If possible, consider screening more than one therapist in order to find the best fit for your needs. This often onerous process can be alleviated by conducting brief interviews over the telephone. Among the criteria to weigh are your own gut feelings. Finding a good match is critical.

Note: *As long as you are safe*, sometimes it is helpful to choose a topic that won't be too gut-wrenching for you to discuss during your first telephone call or appointment. Consider a "trial" topic so that you can interview the therapist and get a sense of whether or not you feel he or she is qualified and a good fit for you.

- **Discuss your privacy requests with prospective therapists.** Inform the therapists of the level of privacy with which you are most comfortable (e.g. not having bills sent directly to your home, not leaving detailed phone messages on your home answering machine).
- **Consider pragmatics.** Plan for continuity of care after the crisis subsides. While in the throes of a crisis (e.g. death of a loved one, marital breakdown, suicidal crises) many people are willing, and even eager, to travel anywhere to see a therapist they believe is qualified. However, traveling longer distances may become impractical as the crisis eases.

ADDITIONAL SUGGESTIONS:

- **Talk to somebody even if there appears to be no solution to your crisis.** At the very least, talking to others may help you feel less alone.
- **Maintain hope and patience.** Understand that recovery is *a process that takes time*. However, with the appropriate support and treatment, your feelings can transform and you can feel hope again.

- **Rely on those you trust.** Avoid worsening your despair or depression by withdrawing and alienating yourself. Understand that *not* telling others about your feelings can be more harmful to *both* you and your loved ones. Allow them the opportunity to help you.

FAMILY MEMBERS & FRIENDS: OFFER TO GATHER RECOMMENDATIONS

Oftentimes, family and friends feel helpless as they watch their loved one struggle with mental health issues. Finding a good therapist is an arduous task for those who are in distress. Offering (or accepting the request) to conduct the research and gather recommendations or referrals for mental healthcare can be enormously helpful.

- **Ask for the information on their insurance card** and permission to call the insurance company to determine the insurance benefits.

Note: Privacy regulations should not be applicable to generalized inquiries (e.g. information that can otherwise be gathered publicly). For example, calling an insurance company (without identifying the insured) to ask what benefits a person would have under XYZ plan, or contacting a prospective therapist in order to find out if they have availability, accept insurance, and if they have experience in a particular area.

- **Discuss the level of privacy and discretion they desire** so you know whether or not to keep their identity anonymous.
- **Offer to conduct the initial telephone interviews** and preliminary screening of prospective therapists.
- **Narrow down the options, make a list of prospective therapists,** their contact information and the next available appointments for each.
- ***Try to have at least two therapists on the list of recommendations.** In the event the first therapist is not the right match, they can more easily call and try another one without having to ask you to start this process all over again.
- **Offer to call and schedule** the first appointment with the therapist.
- **Offer to drive or accompany** them to their first (or future) appointment(s).

ADDITIONAL SUGGESTIONS FOR FAMILY & FRIENDS:

- **Educate yourself** about the signs and risk factors for depression and suicide.
- **Research alternatives** or additions to mental healthcare or conventional therapy.
- **Maintain a balance** between persistence and patience. Respect the person who is in distress, but remain aware that the behaviors or choices made by such persons may not be in their best interests.
- **When in doubt, consult a mental health professional** for advice and support *for yourself*.
- **Utilize crisis hotlines**. Many hotlines provide 24/7 guidance, support and helpful information to those who are concerned about a friend or loved one.
- **Enlist the help of family members, friends, and other means of support**. If possible, avoid shouldering all the responsibilities that caring for your loved one entails.
- **Take care of the caregiver (yourself)**. Your ability to help may become diminished by fatigue or burnout. Find a healthy balance.

OTHER TIPS FOR GATHERING RECOMMENDATIONS:

- **Ask people you are comfortable with for recommendations** (e.g. religious advisor, physician, family, friends, teachers, colleagues). They, or someone they know, may have been to a therapist who they would recommend.
- **Contact non-profit or other mental health organizations** to obtain referrals in the area. Additionally, many crisis hotlines provide resources and other helpful information (e.g. 800-273-8255, 800-273-TALK).
- **Contact community and state resources** (e.g. departments of psychiatry at nearby hospitals, your state's psychological or social work associations).
- **Utilize websites**. Many health insurance companies and mental health organizations have informative websites that list providers by location, specialty and other selection criteria. See the Resources section of *Waking Up: Climbing Through the Darkness* and www.TerryWise.com for examples.

▪ **Consider alternatives to mental healthcare.**

If you prefer not to engage in psychotherapy, or if your insurance or support networks are inadequate, or if you would like to supplement existing support, consider exploring other services. A few examples:

- Support groups
- Hospital or community outreach programs and clinics
- Hotlines
- University clinics
- Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs)
- Spiritual advisors
- Focus chat rooms
- Services provided by non-profit organizations

Suggestion: Ask a friend or family member to help with the research.

▪ **Consider alternatives to conventional therapy.**

If you prefer not to engage in psychotherapy, or if your insurance or support networks are inadequate, or if you would like to supplement existing support, consider exploring alternative therapies. A few examples:

- Exercise
- Meditation
- Yoga
- Relaxation techniques
- Biofeedback
- Acupuncture
- Massage
- Pet therapy

QUESTIONS TO ASK THE INSURANCE COMPANY:

1. What is the scope of mental health coverage and the number of covered visits per year?
2. What is the amount of the co-pays?
3. Do you have a list of names and numbers of local therapists who are approved on the plan?
4. Are there any pre-authorization or Primary Care Physician (PCP) referral requirements?
5. How many visits are approved until the insured has to obtain further authorizations or referrals? Initial authorizations may be limited to a certain number of sessions.
6. Do you cover any alternative therapies, such as acupuncture or massage therapy?

QUESTIONS TO ASK PROSPECTIVE THERAPISTS:

1. Are you accepting new patients?
2. Do you accept XYZ Insurance Company?
 - A. **If no**, do you offer a **sliding scale** (fee reductions)?
 - B. **If yes**, do you offer a sliding scale if and when coverage runs out?
3. In addition to co-pays, are patients responsible for any other amounts not covered by insurance?
4. What is your Provider ID # for XYZ Insurance Company?
(This may be required when you call the insurance company for a pre-authorization or referral)
5. What times of the day and what days of the week do you have availability?
(To determine the most suitable match for the prospective patient's schedule)
6. What are your areas of expertise and your experience level?
A few examples:
 - How long have you been practicing?
 - What degrees do you hold?
 - Do you treat patients who fit this description (e.g. in this age group)?
 - What specific experience do you have treating people who are _____?
(e.g. caregivers, or depressed, or suicidal, or bereaved, etc.)
7. What is your policy if a patient experiences a suicidal (or other) crisis after hours?
8. Can you provide me with a few of your next available appointments?

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