

The ultimate guide to finding a therapist

From financial concerns to trait preferences, learn how to choose a compatible therapist and prepare for a critical step in your mental health journey.



GoodTherapy

Seeking professional help is arguably the most important step in one's mental health journey. There are many factors to consider when evaluating therapists, and the options can seem overwhelming, causing many people to abandon the effort before they've really started. But the process is certainly worth the reward, and we've made it easier by breaking down the most pertinent considerations you should take into account and why.

As [well-known psychotherapist](#) Esther Perel puts it:

"Whether it's individual, couples, or family therapy, the kind of therapist I always recommend is one who is challenging and direct but not judgmental; is open-minded and willing to let people explore options in life that are very different from their own," Perel said.

"There are innumerable modalities of therapy, so landing in a good place with a suitable approach is a process, but you must understand what it is you're looking for before you start."

Know why you are looking for a therapist

Some people find a therapist after a specific life-changing moment or series of events that have abruptly changed their mood, behaviors, or overall outlook on life. A messy breakup or loss of a loved one can trigger a deep sense of grief, oftentimes accompanied by depressive episodes or feelings of despair. Other times, external life circumstances may be stable, but underlying thoughts and emotions are inexplicably different or seem incongruous with the life you'd like to lead.

The stigma around therapy has lessened over the years, but unfortunately, it still exists. For instance, the Anxiety & Depression Association [reported that roughly 7 million U.S. adults](#) experience anxiety, yet only 43% are seeking treatment for it.

However, it may be helpful to know that, as of 2021, [about 42 million adults in the United States received some form of mental health treatment](#), accounting for about 13% of the total population.

Regardless of what is prompting a deeper exploration into your mental health, take inventory of your recent thoughts, feelings, and actions so you have a better understanding of which professionals are most aligned with your needs, why you want to find a therapist, and what you hope to get out of it.

Action Item

Write down the top three reasons why you (and your partner or family member, if applicable) are seeking therapy.

Examples:

- I have become increasingly uninterested partaking in activities I've previously enjoyed.
- My partner and I have been fighting more than normal, and it's affecting our relationship.

Now that you have identified some of the top reasons you are looking for a therapist, let's get some practical concerns out of the way.

How to navigate the logistical and financial components of therapy

Which is better: teletherapy or face-to-face?

Deciding whether you prefer telehealth or in-person care will impact the pool of therapists available to you, as, in most cases, the former grants prospective clients the option to choose professionals from across their state and even out-of-state, depending on the counselor's license. Many individuals and couples also cite the time-saving and flexible nature of online therapy as the main draw for remote care.

The effectiveness of telehealth may depend on the mental health symptoms a client is experiencing, but one [randomized trial](#) found that ***out of 325 patients with depressive symptoms, outcomes for telehealth and face-to-face treatment were equivalent.***

Prior to the onset of COVID-19, many insurance carriers did not cover such services unless they were in-person, but since telehealth proved vital during the pandemic, state and federal regulations have helped solidify online therapy as a critical means of care delivery, and in some cases, have even prohibited insurance firms from denying teletherapy coverage.

Getting to know your therapist in a physical office setting also has its benefits, however, as it's hard to overstate the ability of forging connections face-to-face, rather than through a computer screen, and monitoring one's body language and mannerisms often helps therapists get to know their clients better and develop a trusting relationship. And if you have a family with young children, or perhaps you're a young professional living with roommates, finding a quiet, private room where others cannot hear you – much less at the same time every week – presents challenges.

During your therapist search, be sure to use directories that allow you to filter for telehealth or in-person options, such as [GoodTherapy](#).

Paying for therapy

Most individuals and couples choose to use insurance coverage, and if that is the route you plan to take, make sure you read through your plan's explanation of benefits or call the member services number on your insurance card to understand how your plan covers talk therapy.

Not all therapists accept insurance, and those who do may only be able to bill a few carriers, so it's imperative you understand what your costs will be before committing to someone. Filtered [directory searches](#) can also help locate professionals who accept your plan, and many therapists offer a free initial consultation. Keep in mind some mental health treatments may fall outside the realm of talk therapy and could result in a different price structure. However, your therapist will be able to navigate those costs if and when the time comes.

LCSW, MFT, PsyD, MD: What do all the acronyms mean?

There are many types of mental health professionals, and some are required to have certain types of training or education compared to others. States vary in terms of what each type of credential is required, but generally speaking, it's important to understand a few broad categories of professionals in your search:



Licensed clinical social worker

LCSWs offer counseling and emotional and behavioral support, similar to therapists. However, as their primary education tends to involve social work, they also tend to have experience working in community-based settings that are not confined to a private practice and involve the coordination of critical services to more vulnerable segments of the population.



Therapist

Therapists deal with clients' mental well-being and must have a master's degree to practice. They also must complete a minimum number of hours administering psychotherapy services under the supervision of a licensed professional to qualify for a license, although each state varies in those requirements.



Psychologist

The terms 'psychologist' and 'therapist' are often used interchangeably and for good reason in most cases, as they both provide emotional and behavioral support in similar ways. A psychologist, often noted as PsyD or EdD, also has a PhD, usually in a certain field such as clinical or educational psychology.



Psychiatrist

The terms 'psychologist' and 'therapist' are often used interchangeably and for good reason in most cases, as they both provide emotional and behavioral support in similar ways. A psychiatrist, often noted as MD, also has a PhD, usually in a certain field such as clinical or educational psychology.

Identify your top traits and characteristics in a therapist

Let's start thinking about the kinds of expertise and background that are important to you. What's most critical is working with someone who can both challenge and support you during your sessions, and that comes in different forms. Remember, all therapy is confidential, so you should feel comfortable being as open and honest as you can with your therapist.

Beyond communication and personality factors, it's useful to think about other types of identities you'd find comforting. In many cases, talking with someone who shares a particular life experience originating from a shared culture, age, gender, or religion – or having extensive experience working with those populations – engenders a sense of ease and trust.

But it's important to reiterate that many individuals, couples, and families maintain successful relationships with therapists who don't share core parts of their external identities. There are female clients who feel comfortable working with male therapists, for instance, and some LGBTQ+ clients are agnostic as to how their therapist identifies, so long as they are affirming and supportive.

If you're not sure if and how these types of preferences rank as part of your own search, that's ok too. We'll break down a few of the most common examples to give you a better understanding of what some individuals and couples tend to consider as they search for a therapist.

How to approach therapy for the LGBTQ+ community

Seeking counselors, therapists and psychologists who are affirming and fully accepting of all gender and sexual identities is a baseline criteria for LGBTQ+ identifying individuals. A 2022 [Trevor Project survey](#) found only 37% of LGBTQ+ teens and young adults – and 32% of transgender and non-binary adolescents – believed their home was an affirming space, signaling the ongoing need for mental health professionals to foster safe environments in their practices.

But despite its importance, there are more factors LGBTQ+ individuals and couples should contemplate when finding a therapist, including their experience and education working with such communities.

“Even therapists who are personally supportive of LGBTQ+ people report feeling ill-equipped to address the unique needs of the population. This lack of preparation may explain, at least in part, why LGBTQ+ clients often report experiencing microaggressions and other forms of minority stress in the course of receiving mental and behavioral health care services,” a [National Institute of Health paper](#) stated.

LGBTQ+ individuals, couples, and families seeking therapy should ensure the professional they work with has experience working with similar demographics and understands the societal nuances that are not necessarily applicable to heterosexual individuals or families.

Consider age and generational gaps

General differences also color how we interact and relate to others. Some may prefer working with a professional who is already familiar with navigating some of life’s common milestones or perhaps has an intimate understanding of the kind of societal circumstances a client has grown up in.

As many in the millennial age group are raising young families, for instance, some may prefer to work with a therapist who has familiarity with the stressors of marriage and childrearing. Similarly, baby boomers could feel more at ease with a counselor who understands the challenges accompanying retirement, and Generation Z might seek someone who is knowledgeable of early career pressures in today’s climate.

Understanding the ideal age range of a therapist can help narrow down your search. Be sure to take into account the life stage of you and your partner, if applicable, to understand how well-equipped your prospective therapist may be to support you during certain life stages.

How to think about gender preferences

When clients do state preferences for certain therapist characteristics, gender is the most commonly reported, [research has shown](#), with about 68% of female clients preferring a therapist of the same sex.

Not surprisingly, gender can play a major role in the comfortability a client has with their therapist, as each gender presents varied experiences and challenges within society and their interpersonal relationships. While studies indicate women who have experienced sexual assault are much more likely to seek out a female therapist, men may conversely prefer talking with someone who more intimately understands the challenges associated with masculinity and emotional vulnerability. This becomes particularly acute when taking into account that ***roughly 17% of women seek out counseling services compared to about 10% of men.***

For couples, be sure to talk with your partner about whether your future therapist’s gender will impact your experiences. Keep in mind that, no matter their gender identity, all therapists should be knowledgeable on the impacts of gender roles and challenges for both men and women.



Account for therapists' ethnicity, religion, or culture

An individual or couple's culture, race, or ethnicity can impact how likely they are to not only find someone with an understanding of their background but to forge a positive, long-term relationship with a therapist.

"It has been noted that clients of color have substantial barriers to seeking psychological services, are less likely to receive expected benefits of counseling, report poorer quality of care, and are at a greater risk of prematurely discontinuing counseling services," a [study](#) from 2020 noted.

The same academic article noted that roughly 40% of survey respondents indicated it was important to match with racially or ethnically similar counselors.

While such preferences are not universal, it helps to ask yourself if this will be a key trait to look for during your mental health journey.

Action Item

Do any of the traits or characteristics listed above resonate with you?

If so, which ones, and why?

Assess therapeutic approaches and therapist's expertise

Another important aspect to consider is whether you and/or your partner live with mental health conditions or have experiences that make certain therapeutic approaches more appealing than others. Here are a few examples:



Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

This type of therapy, or [CBT](#), focuses on behavior changes through understanding individuals' thought processes, behaviors, and perhaps negative ways of thinking. According to the American Psychological Association, this approach focuses more on what is currently going on in the person's life, rather than all the factors that may have led up to them.



Emotion-Focused Therapy

With [emotion-focused therapy](#), therapists promote the awareness and exploration of one's emotions to facilitate change. With better understanding, expression, and regulation of one's emotions, clients can start to see improvements in their interpersonal relationships and even with themselves. While such an approach is used for individuals, it is also particularly helpful for couples and families experiencing communication roadblocks.



Eye movement desensitization and reprocessing

This approach, or [EMDR](#), is especially helpful for those living with post-traumatic stress syndrome, particularly in light of certain life events that are hard to re-live. The client typically recalls such memories during a supervised session, while making certain eye movements and focusing on external stimuli, as guided by the therapist.



Dialectical behavior therapy

Useful for regulating intense emotions and impulses, perhaps as part of a psychiatric condition, [DBT](#) incorporates aspects of CBT as well as individual and group sessions.

Remember – you don't need to have a specific approach in mind to start counseling, but understanding your options may help guide you in your search.

If you have previously been diagnosed with PTSD or other mental health conditions, such as depression, anxiety, or neurodivergence, it's important to work with therapists who have expertise in that area. Even without an official diagnosis, it could be helpful to seek professionals who

have worked extensively with clients who share certain life experiences with you, such as military veterans or domestic abuse survivors.

Counselors and therapists may also hold additional licenses or certifications in particular specialties, such as substance abuse, grief, or eating disorders. If there is a particular issue you are struggling with, be sure to ask your prospective counselor if they have additional credentials in that area as well.

Using an [online directory](#) will help you to find a therapist using various filter criteria and preferences, whether it's related to their expertise, credentials, location, insurance options, and more.

Prepare for the intake conversation

Sometimes when requesting an appointment, therapists will respond with an intake questionnaire, whereas some will also request a brief telephone or video conversation to get to know you.

Preparing and articulating your thoughts on why you and/or your partner are seeking help gives the therapist the ability to understand whether it will be a good fit. Some questions may include:

- Why are you seeking therapy?
- Have you been to therapy before? If so, what did you like and/or dislike the most?
 - If you haven't been to therapy, what concerns do you have about starting?
- What would you ultimately like to accomplish in therapy?

Conversely, it's helpful to have some questions handy to make sure they are the right fit. Take a moment to reflect on some of the presented topics and identify some of the traits, offerings and credentials that resonated the most.

Action Item

Write down your top 5 characteristics, areas of expertise or therapeutic approaches that feel particularly important in your search to find a therapist.

Write down 3-5 questions you would like to ask a prospective therapist.

Evaluate therapy sessions

Once you've narrowed down what you're looking for, the next step is to find a therapist through directories like GoodTherapy. Perhaps you'll align with the first counselor you speak with, but if not, that's ok too. Treatment progress hinges on client openness and vulnerability, which is suppressed when we don't feel comfortable with someone.

Checking in with yourself after the first few sessions is also important. In the words of Perel:

"Therapy is a conversation and a collaboration, and a therapist is not an all-knowing person that has the truth about you and your life. It is healthy to evaluate your therapeutic relationship, and a good therapist will welcome a conversation about any concerns. It may take a few attempts to find the right therapist, but doing so will change your life."

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