

How to Find a Therapist You Can Talk To
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“I cannot work with her, I hated her shoes! Even though she was warm, intelligent and easy to talk to, I know she’s not the one. I would not be able to look at her shoes week after week”. I was helping my friend find a therapist and after meeting each potential therapist, she would report back to me and share her impressions.

Frieda was ready to confront some problems she had been struggling with that had recently made life more difficult for her. She had never been in therapy before and thought that since I was a therapist I could help her find someone who would be “really good.”

“Of course I’ll help you,” I told her.

The prospect of entering psychotherapy usually puts people in a vulnerable position.

When looking for support and unconditional acceptance from someone who can help us make the changes we want to make in our lives, we want to be able to connect with and trust that person enough to reveal our weaknesses and struggles. People who have been in therapy base their search on past experience, what worked and didn’t work for them helps them find a good fit. When starting therapy for the first time, there are some basic guidelines that are helpful.

What might be really good for one person could be very different for another person. It helps to outline specific details. I asked Frieda if she had a gender preference and a general age range she would want the clinician to fit into. We got concrete about what she wanted to work on so that we could find someone with the appropriate experience. I gave her a list of several therapists and suggested she call them to see how she felt with them over the phone, and possibly meet some of them to see who she felt most comfortable with.

There is no guarantee that the therapist you choose is going to be the right match. It's similar to dating and looking for a life partner. You go out with someone you feel drawn to and after several dates you either find that you have lots in common, or that you are not as compatible as you thought you'd be.

Finding the right therapist for my friend was just as complicated as setting her up on a blind date! I knew her well, if I was trying to refer someone I didn't know I'd have to spend a lot of time finding out their history and needs. This is to match the client's needs with a therapist with the right experience. Many clinicians offer free phone consultations and spend up to an hour on the phone hoping to understand what someone needs. This initial consultation is valuable for both the person seeking therapy and the therapist. Both want to make sure they are entering a relationship that will work. A seasoned clinician can gather a lot of knowledge about someone during the initial call.

There are many therapeutic styles and psychological perspectives. Different clinicians work differently. My style is interactive, so if someone is looking for a strictly analytic experience, I am not the right person for them. If they clearly need specific experience, and I don't have it, then I must act with integrity and tell them. If we have a good connection they might decide to work with me anyway, but they have the right to complete and accurate information about who I am and what my scope of experience and expertise is.

Practical details are also important. What meeting times are available, where the office is located, accessibility to parking or public transportation are all important factors. Some offices are wheelchair accessible and some are not. Finances should be brought up immediately. Many clinicians accept insurance but some don't. More and more therapists in private practice settings are not billing insurance companies directly because of the extensive paperwork it involves and the length of time it takes to get paid.

Some therapists offer sliding scale fees so that good therapy is available to people in a variety of economic brackets. In situations when even a nominal fee is out of reach, an intern or a low fee clinic is the appropriate referral. Providing this information falls under the category of consumer rights in addition to professional ethics.

People who have been in therapy often know exactly what they are looking for. For someone who is new to therapy, the onus is on the professional to help guide

inexperienced people, and to inform them of the questions they should ask to help them find a clinician who can meet their needs.

After meeting a potential therapist, Frieda and I would discuss how things went. She wanted me to help her decide who to choose. Some of her experiences and responses were surprising.

When we met in the café and she blurted out her inability to stare at one therapist's shoes, I started thinking like a therapist and not like her friend.

If I took Frieda's observation at face value, I could have reduced it to resistance or superficiality. However, I thought about what the shoes meant to my friend.

My friends' background was working class and earning a place in a more privileged sector of society was very important to her. Despite of the fact that she had reached her goals through study and hard work, she was ambivalent about enjoying her material wealth and the trappings attached to it. Although she had what she wanted, there was some confusion about what finally getting it meant. As her friend, I knew this about her. Even with the most experienced clinician doing an incredibly thorough intake, this detail could easily not come up until deep into the therapy. This was not the main problem Frieda was seeking resolution for, but it was part of her psyche. I believed it was leading her to choose to work with someone who would not judge her for wearing more

expensive, stylish shoes. As her friend, I was confronted with a dilemma. Should I make the interpretation about what I believed was causing her reaction, or should I be quiet and let her decide to follow her intuition?

I spent time thinking this over, assessing my values about what psychotherapy really offered people. At the root of solving immediate or past problems, self-empowerment is a trait that a majority of my clients struggle with attaining. I thought about this in regards to Frieda and decided that she had to find someone who wore shoes she'd be able to look at week after week. I felt it was not up to me to interfere with her process of finding a relationship where she could venture into the realms of her unconscious.

She met with other therapists and finally made a choice that proved to be quite successful. Her experience was satisfying and the therapy was enlightening. Frieda made her choice with some basic guidance from me, but without my analysis of her response to the shoes interfering with her choice.

Whenever I meet someone for the first time or am asked for a referral, I remember Frieda's dilemma. I invite the prospective client to meet with me or someone else who can be the person who helps to lead them to self-empowerment.