

Do I need therapy?

An expert tells you how to decide

by Karen Kimball, PhD
for 50 Plus Lifestyles

To be human is to have problems. We worry about the quality of our marriages and obsess about our children's well-being. We fret over lost friendships or our own lost potential. These universal concerns sometimes overwhelm us and we believe they are insurmountable.



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This can make us hopeless, helpless and stuck—one definition of depression.

Psychotherapy, or “talk therapy,” can effectively help solve many of our dilemmas or at least soften their negative effects. But how do we know our problems (or those of our loved ones) can be ameliorated by therapy? And how do we choose a therapist?

To go or not to go?

That is the difficult question. You might choose therapy for yourself or loved one(s) when you think an objective perspective could help. Go to learn about yourself, improve your relationships, accomplish specific goals and learn practical problem-solving strategies. You might see a therapist for personal growth work, to forge a new path during transition times (when facing an empty nest, caring for elderly parents or divorcing). Emotional and social issues can be defined, clarified and solved systematically, just like concrete problems can.

Types of therapy

Therapies include individual psychotherapy, couples and family therapy, drug and alcohol counseling, career and job counseling, hypnotherapy and medication treatment. Sometimes a combination of these therapies is suggested. There are also professionals holding different degrees who

practice therapy: PhD psychologists, MD psychiatrists, Master's degree counselors or social workers, family and marriage counselors, etc. But how do you choose one that fits your personality, goals, timeframe and financial resources?

Choosing a therapist

Ask people you trust for suggestions, such as friends, family members, your family physician, attorney or clergyperson, rabbi or priest. School guidance counselors, social workers and psychologists can also be very helpful, as can co-workers or your human resources office. Try to get at least three names to call.

Start your search with a short phone interview. Ask:

- Have you dealt with problems like mine?
- How do you treat them?
- What therapeutic approaches do you use?
- What is your degree and training?
- How long have you been in practice?
- What is your availability in emergencies?

Ask about practical matters such as fees, hours and whether they practice in a group. It is legitimate to request a fifteen-minute meeting (free) or one to two full sessions (paid) before making your decision.

How do you choose? It is vital the therapist:

- cares about you and your issues;
- believes you can make progress;
- has a treatment plan;
- listens well; and
- helps you feel normal, not crazy or weird.

Trust your gut reaction.

Therapy expectations

The length of therapy varies, depending on the number and complexity of the problems, your emotional energy and willingness to work, your financial and time resources, and the therapist's expertise, competence and availability. Often you can expect tangible



results within five to ten sessions. In fact, it is a good idea to re-evaluate your goals and progress after five sessions.

Expect your therapist to be honest and respectful, direct and open. You should feel free to ask any question, but be aware therapists differ on how much personal information or opinions they reveal. Your therapist should be upfront about services and fees. Above all, he or she should protect your confidentiality. It is essential that you like your therapist and feel you can share your deepest concerns and feelings. Often therapy can be enjoyable; it is very exciting to experience mastery over yourself and your world, and it is reassuring to feel understood.

Therapy is well worth the effort, and its positive effects can be life-changing.

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