

Finding a therapist

Taking the next step on the road to wellness

By Karen K. Kimball

So, you've decided that therapy is for you. The crucial challenge now is finding a good therapist with whom you can work. Unfortunately, there is no organized system for finding a good therapist, but you can improve your chances.

If you are in an HMO, you will need to choose from a pre-determined list of HMO providers. If you are not in an HMO, or if you are but want the freedom to choose, it is best to ask people you trust for therapists' names. These might be your good friends or family members who have seen therapists with whom they are very satisfied.

However, sometimes people do not want to share their therapist because they feel it is a threat to confidentiality or to their exclusive relationship with their therapist. Remember too that you may have a different reaction to another person's therapist. You also can ask your physician (especially doctors in family practice and OB/GYN), your clergy or rabbi, or your attorney. School guidance counselors and social workers can be helpful in giving suggestions, as are co-workers or personnel in your EAP office. Some of my clients say they found my name in the phone book or on a Web site. Try to start with the names of three therapists.

Calling for an initial appointment can be frightening if you feel very vulnerable or are afraid you might be seen as "mentally ill." However, it is much more common now, especially in Madison, for people to have seen a therapist or be in therapy.

Once you make the call, ask for a short phone interview. For instance, I have gotten calls from prospective clients who say, "I think I want to make an appointment but I have some questions first." It is reasonable to request a 15-minute meeting, free of charge, to see if you like the therapist and if

you could work well together. You might also request just one session for the same purpose; however, you probably will be charged for this.

Important questions to ask the therapist are:

- Have you dealt with problems like mine before?
- How would you help me?
- What kind(s) of therapy do you do?
- What is your degree and training?
- How long have you been in practice?

Also, ask about practical matters such as fees, hours, whether they have access to physicians (if a non-physician) for medications if needed, confidentiality, etc. Be an assertive consumer; ask any questions you want. If the therapist seems uncomfortable with this approach, that makes your choice easier.

After your initial contact with the therapist, you might need one or two sessions to make the decision to commit to therapy. It is very important that you can say "yes" to the following:

- Does s/he seem to care about me and want to help me?
- Do I believe s/he can help me?
- Does s/he think my problems are solvable and does s/he have a plan to help me?
- What is my "gut" feeling?
- Do I like him/her?
- Do I feel listened to, and can I be myself?

Don't be afraid to say "no" to therapy with this person, but also keep in mind that therapy can stir up unpleasant feelings. You might check out your reservations, if you have them, with the therapist or with a trusted friend. Again, how the therapist handles

your reservations tells you a lot; is she or he respectful of your concerns? Does she or he respond in a straightforward manner?

After you enter treatment, what can you expect? The duration of therapy varies, depending on the problems and your resources. However, you can expect some results within the first five to 10 sessions. In fact, it is often advisable after about five sessions to evaluate your progress: What are your goals and are you making progress toward them? If not, what can be done differently?

Costs vary also, usually depending on the therapist's degree. On average, fees are (for a 50-minute session): \$125 for a social worker or counselor with a master's degree; \$135 to \$145 for a Ph.D. psychologist; and up to \$250 for an M.D. psychiatrist. Many insurance companies pay for outpatient therapy but coverage varies. You can check with your insurance company, personnel office, or the therapist's billing department to see what your coverage is. Therapists also treat people who pay out-of-pocket, and some offer a sliding fee.

The process of deciding to seek therapy and finding a compatible and competent therapist can seem daunting. However, it is well worth the effort, because the results can make you happier and more satisfied with your significant relationships.



This is the second in a two-part series. Last month's article talked about why one might seek therapy. Dr. Karen Kimball has practiced as a licensed psychologist in Madison for 24 years doing individual and couples therapy and hypnosis. She can be reached at 663-5435.