

Questions to Ask a Therapist

Resource Sheet. Created June 2023

This resource provides some guidelines on how to choose a therapist who can meet your needs.

This resource is meant to start you on this journey and give you pointers, but not serve as a definitive guide. Please do your due diligence!

A therapist can work with people who need help with their mental illness, but also works with people who are basically mentally healthy but need healing from emotional hurt. They also work with processes, helping clients to understand ways to accomplish their goals, move past emotional, psychological, neurological, or traumatic barriers. They are a safe space.

Therapists usually offer one trial session or a free initial meeting. Meet with them. After your trial session, just answer two questions to determine if you want to proceed at all with that therapist:

- Do I feel that this person truly hears and sees me?
- Is there any part of me that wants to go back for more sessions?

Answering no to either question is a deal breaker. Don't work with someone who clearly doesn't understand you, or whom you don't want to see again. A therapist should give you a sense of validation and relief, and make you feel they can help you bear your burdens. It's not that they solve your problems for you; it's that they help you figure out how to solve them, and make you feel empowered to do so.

It's best to see a therapist who is licensed. This does not include being certified in some form of therapy. Pre-licensed is okay if the therapist is being supervised.

Beyond that, here are some helpful questions that can be asked to get a sense of a potential therapist. A lot of the answers to these questions should be on the therapist's website or can be answered prior to the first session. But you should feel free to ask in the first (free) session before committing to a therapeutic relationship with them:

What is your education and training? What degree did you obtain?

The therapist should have a Master's or Doctoral degree in a mental health field that provides intensive training in psychotherapy, such as psychology, psychiatry, psychiatric nursing, or counseling. Degrees may include MD (psychiatrist), PhD or PsyD (psychologist), MSW (social work), MA, or MS (counselor). Other common credentials are APRN (psychiatric nurse practitioner), LPC (licensed professional counselor), and MFT (marriage and family therapist).

What kind of license do you have?

Do not see a therapist who is not licensed. A “certification” in some form of therapy is not a license.

How long have you been providing therapy? Are you still under supervision?

It’s common and expected for newly licensed therapists to still be under supervision for a year or two. If they are not licensed and not under supervision, they are not legitimately practicing therapy.

What is your area of specialty?

All therapists have different areas of expertise and specialty. Find one that resonates with you. If you don’t understand their psychobabble, ask them to break it down in layman’s terms (aka, “real English”).

What would a typical session look like?

The therapist should be able to describe a typical session with them, what it would look like, and how they would address some of your presenting problems.

How long will therapy last?

The length of therapy can’t always be predicted. However, therapists will have some general idea of the typical course of treatment for many concerns. Brief therapy may be only 6-12 weekly sessions, while other therapies may take a few months or longer.

How long is each session? How often?

Many therapists hold 45-50 minute weekly sessions, but some may offer longer or more frequent sessions. Also, check on available days and times to make sure therapy fits your schedule.

What are the fees for therapy? Is insurance accepted?

This can sometimes be complicated. If the therapist is in the “network” of providers for your health insurance, this usually equates to a more affordable “co-payment” (the amount you pay for each session). If the therapist is “out of network,” it’s possible your insurance may still cover a part of the fee. Other therapists do not accept insurance, so you pay the therapist the entire fee. Many therapists are willing to be somewhat flexible about their fees, particularly if you have financial hardships. Don’t be afraid to ask for a lower fee or to inquire about possible referrals to lower-cost therapy providers.

Is therapy offered in person? Online?

Since the pandemic, most therapists now offer online services, but be sure to check. If in-person sessions occur, find out about office location, parking, and other on-site details.

How are cancellations or missed appointments handled?

Find out about procedures for notifying the therapist when you need to cancel an appointment. There can sometimes be a fee if you fail to attend an appointment or cancel without sufficient advance notice.

In summary

A good therapist can literally change your life. It's important to take the time to interview your therapist and make sure they are the right fit for YOU. Ask the questions you need to determine if they will be the most competent therapist for you and the right fit. Keep in mind that through all the questions, at the end of the day, it really does boil down to your feeling heard, seen and validated and your desire to go back for more sessions.



For more resources and support programs for individuals who are deaf, hard of hearing, or deaf-blind, please contact us at (808) 369-0499 or csc@csc-hawaii.org. Mahalo!