

# How do I find a therapist?

By Brendon Clark

Sometimes we need some extra help to get through things we're dealing with. When it comes to finding a therapist, it's like finding any other professional. Think what you would do if you needed a mechanic or dentist. It's the same. We've put together an overview here of some things to think about to help you choose a therapist.

## For starters

Ask around. Get recommendations. Check they have expertise and experience in what you need. Are they taking new work? How much will it cost? How far will you have to travel to see them? See who you feel comfortable with. If you're not confident with them, find someone else. After all, you're a paying customer and you want value for money. If you don't like or trust your plumber, you find a new one. Same for therapists. And if you can, enlist help from friends or family, including going with you a couple of times if you're nervous.

## Qualifications

Generally, more qualifications mean more training and more cost for you, but you may save money because they can be more effective in time.

Always check credentials. Get testimonials if you can. Ask how many complaints they've had and whether they've had complaints about conduct or ethics. As a rule, get the best you can afford.

## What's the difference?

**Psychiatrists** are physicians trained in medicine and specialising in psychiatry. They are the most expensive and the most highly trained, and tend to work in cases of severe mental distress. They make diagnoses and may often prescribe medication.

**Psychologists** come with a range of specialties. Look for a clinical or health psychologist. They work with mental distress of all kinds but can't prescribe medication. They are next most highly trained. They'll work with behaviour change and strategies, and may use assessment tests.

**Psychotherapist** is a broad term for people who offer talking therapies (which can be a range of qualifications) but a specific qualification in psychotherapy means less training than a psychologist, with fewer tools to use, and fewer assessment options.

**Counsellors** are generally the least well trained and have fewer tools still, but they are still working with emotion and mental distress. This doesn't mean they aren't worth seeing, it means you need to choose carefully, based on what you need and what they offer.

## Registration

For more qualified practitioners, registration with a professional body is compulsory. Registration protects them and you, and is about standards and quality. It guarantees a certain level of training and oversight, and gives you somewhere to complain if you believe they have breached your rights, or their code of ethics. Only work with a registered professional. Counsellors do not have to be registered in New Zealand, but they can belong to a professional membership association. If they have no professional memberships, keep looking. You can always check on someone's membership by contacting their association.

## Experience

The more experienced they are, the better for you. Check whether they have experience with your particular needs. It's best if you're not their first one. And no one is an expert at everything. Choose a specialist.

## Language

Therapists, like most specialists, have specific language, acronyms, and jargon that can sound confusing and meaningless. Sometimes, people can hide behind jargon. Make sure anything you don't understand is explained to you in a way you *do* understand.

## Clinical models

There are hundreds of therapeutic approaches. Some are old fashioned and some so new they're untested. Many are fads. You need always ask what approach they use, and get them to explain it to you, and why they think it will help, along with evidence. Some models are generally applicable and have largely stood the test of time. Whatever style the therapist uses, they should be able to point to evidence for its effectiveness and why they think it will work for you. Be sure to ask. If you feel uncertain, keep looking.

## Therapeutic structure and styles

Clinical models aren't enough on their own. Therapist style has a large impact on how they use a model and the outcomes. Did they do an assessment? Have they identified target areas? Do they give you homework? Are they working to a plan? Are they goal-directed? Hint: they should definitely have a treatment plan with clear goals. Do they push you to try harder or let you away with being slack? Is their style empathic or distant? **Trust is crucial. The relationship you have with them is a key element of progress.** Because the relationship is so important, the same therapist may work well for you, but not for someone else, just because the relationship is different.

If you don't have good rapport and trust with them, you're wasting your money. If you feel like it's going nowhere, ask. Therapy can be challenging, even difficult, so don't take difficulty as a sign of lack of progress. Be careful to recognise if lack of progress is because of your own lack of effort or engagement in the process. If not, leave and find someone else.

## Determine what success looks like

What are your own goals? Who sets the goals? What markers do you need that you're making progress? How will you know when you're done? For example, people make mistakes on the way while learning and trying new things, so consistent effort may be a better indicator of progress than immediate behaviour change. How much have you bitten off to work on? Make sure it's manageable and achievable. Ask how long you might expect to be working with them. They should be able to give you a guide. If there's no end in sight, you may be wasting your money and time. That said, be realistic. There are no magic bullets and miracles; people are more complicated than cars and pipes.

## Sexual abuse counselling

Sexual abuse counselling in New Zealand is covered by ACC. The first two sessions are free, and help determine what might need to be done. In order for ACC to pay, the therapist is looking for 'mental injury'. It's a messy term, but because ACC covers injuries, it's what the legislation requires. From there, the therapist will work with you to refer you on if sexual abuse isn't the issue and there's no mental injury, give you a short period of work (up to eight free sessions) if there is low level work, or take you on as a longer term client if sexual abuse or rape is a central problem and there is clear mental injury. ACC pay for all therapy costs, and ACC registered clinicians cannot charge a top up fee. If you want to seek and pay for private help, you're still able to do so.

## If it's just too confusing

Choosing a professional can be difficult because we don't understand exactly what and how they ply their trade, and we may feel confused and even bamboozled by them, wondering if we really need these expensive new parts or service. Similarly, if choosing a therapist gets confusing, because you don't understand what they may be saying, remember you're not an expert! At any point, ask more questions.