



How to Shop for a Therapist

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Tips for finding ‘the therapist equivalent of a soul mate’

Visiting a psychotherapist isn’t like dropping a car off with a mechanic. You have to sit with that person in a room. For an hour or more. Every week.

“Choosing the right therapist is essential,” says MacAndrew Jack, a practicing psychotherapist who also is dean of the Graduate School of Psychology at Naropa University. “Trust and interpersonal connection are critical to bringing about change in psychotherapy.”

But in Boulder County, where therapists possibly outnumber dark-green Subaru Outbacks, how does one go about finding that perfect fit—the therapist equivalent of a soul mate?

Three experienced Boulder psychotherapists—Jack, Celia Bockhoff and Peter Williams—share their perspectives from the other side of the therapy fence, with hopes that the following five tips will help

people seeking a therapist.

Get clear about what you want

It is easy to identify the problems that drive you to therapy—insomnia, anxiety, low self-esteem, a relationship crisis—but less easy to know what path to take to solve them. One question Jack asks new clients is: “If therapy were successful, what would that look like?”

Clarifying your end goal can help determine the best type of therapy to choose. Do you need a therapist who specializes in dealing with certain issues? Do you want a path that delves into your past or one that focuses on the present? Do you want to analyze your thoughts and feelings, or solely get help working on a solution?

All these are questions you might want to work through before embarking on the next step: searching through the therapists that are out there.

Do your research

All three therapists agree that asking friends and family for recommendations is the optimal approach. If that isn't possible and you want a personal recommendation, ask your physician or another health professional, or a leader from your spiritual community.

Alternatively, use the Internet to search for licensed psychotherapists in the Boulder Country area. Several professional institutes have websites where you can search for therapists by specialty and ZIP code. These can provide a good starting point by

giving you the names and websites of potentially compatible therapists.

On the first pass, always check that a therapist is licensed and experienced—you don't want to be the first person your therapist has seen with a particular issue. You may have a preference for seeing one gender or another, and it is important to consider the theoretical orientation of a therapist, i.e., what theories the clinician subscribes to in thinking about a person's problems and how best to treat them. Is the orientation one that suits your particular beliefs, needs and desires?

Be prepared to spend some time on this research step, especially when it comes to perusing websites. Look for therapists who are telling you about their work and philosophy rather than directly selling themselves, and try to glean a feel for the individual behind the professional. "You can often tell a therapist's 'voice' from their website," Jack says.

Interview prospective therapists

Once you have narrowed down your search to a few names, the next advisable step is to phone your choices. This is your opportunity to check the important details such as licensure, experience, orientation, areas of expertise, types of treatment, fees and whether the therapist accepts insurance.

Bockhoff cautions against simply searching for the therapist with the cheapest rates. "You are not going to a therapist to save money," she says. "Just like choosing a car, the cheapest option isn't necessarily the best plan long-term."

If you find a likely match, the next step is to arrange a first meeting; some therapists offer this for free. A full session is better than a brief interview, because it gives a more realistic indication of what future therapy would be like.

Trust your instincts

Studies show that the key elements in bringing about change via therapy are the motivation of the client and the personal relationship between the client and the therapist, Williams says.

“You want to feel that there is a good chemistry or a good rapport with the person,” he says. “If it feels like a good chemistry and good fit, it probably is going to be a good fit. That is an important intangible that you can’t tell from a website or a person’s credentials.”

Bockhoff concurs: “Do all the legwork, do the research, then go with your gut.”

Be prepared to cut the cord

Once you have selected a therapist, it is important to commit to that partnership for a fixed number of sessions (Jack suggests five) to give the chosen approach a thorough try. Sometimes, however, the chemistry just isn’t there. Don’t forget that you are free to walk away.

But Bockhoff, Jack and Williams all caution that instead of simply ending the partnership at that point, it is important to discuss your concerns with the therapist. Therapy isn’t all warm fuzzies, and discomfort may be a sign that the client is coming up

against something challenging that needs to be worked through.

“This can often be the place of really good work, sometimes a real breakthrough,” Bockhoff says.

“The theory is that wounds are our blocks in life,” Williams says. “Wounding often happens within a relationship, and in therapy, wounding gets healed within a relationship.”

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Local Psychotherapy Directories

Boulder Psychotherapists' Guild

www.boulderpsychotherapistsguild.com

This website includes a collection of short “Articles for Consumers.”

The Boulder Psychotherapy Institute

www.boulderpsych.com

This site has a helpful section (at www.boulderpsych.com/thercred.php) describing the different types of licenses and certifications—Ph.D., LPC, LCSW, etc.—recognized by the state of Colorado.



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