Choosing a Therapist or Counselor

It is easy to find a therapist or counselor; but sometimes more difficult to find one that is right for you. A mistake too often made is to locate one referral and begin to see that person. So, unless you can identify someone who clearly demonstrates competencies and skill in working with you and your issue, you should be willing to “shop around”.

What Makes a Good Therapist?

It is important that your therapist have the necessary credentials:

1. Intensive academic study in a mental health field. A good therapist starts with a masters or a doctorate. Wisdom, compassion and empathy are important; knowledge is essential.
2. Supervised clinical experience. A good therapist has completed an extensive training program. It consists of both experience as part of their degree program and post-degree supervised clinical experience.
3. Certification or registration or licensure After clinical experience and passing a national exam, the therapist has been determined competent to counsel by a government licensing board.¹

A good therapist should have:

Knowledge - Appropriate academic degree
Training - Supervised clinical experience
Examination - Passing a requisite national exam
Certification - Professional license
Skill - Ability to listen without judging
Character - Empathy, wisdom, compassion
Relationship - Makes a good impression on you
But an academic degree, and even a government license does not guarantee the person is right for you. You must ask yourself and the therapist questions.

Choosing the Right Therapist or Counselor

Are you looking for group or individual therapy? Couples therapy? Family therapy? What issues do you need to work on? Do you prefer a male or female therapist?

There are many things to consider in choosing a therapist. Some practical issues are location, cost, and what insurance the therapist accepts. Other questions you may want to ask a possible therapist include:

- What is your education? Are you licensed? How many years have you been practicing?
- What are your special areas of practice? What experience do you have with the issues that I need to work on?
- Do you adhere to one mode of therapy or are you flexible depending on the situation?
- How much do you charge? When do you see clients? How soon could I get an appointment?
- What types of insurance do you accept? Do you file insurance claims? Do you accept Medicare or Medicaid insurance?
- Have you ever been in therapy?²

Therapist credentials

Trying to understand therapist credentials is confusing; to say the least. There are literally hundreds of designations. The most common designations are:

L = license, e.g., Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW), Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC), Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist (LMFT), Licensed Addictions Therapist (LAT).

Use of the initials LPC, LCSW, LMFT and LAT represents that the person has met the minimum of a master's degree level of education, supervised experience, and examination requirements established. These persons are licensed for independent practice in the mental health profession.

C = certified, e.g., Certified Addiction Professional (CAP), Certified Addictions Practitioner Assistant (CAPA), Certified Social Worker (CSW), Certified Mental Health Worker (CMHW).
Use of the initials CAP, CSW and CMHW represents that the person is certified with a bachelor's degree, or bachelor's degree equivalent in some cases. This individual is allowed to provide mental health services under the clinical supervision of a licensed professional, as well as administrative supervision by their employer.

Use of the initials CAPA represents that the person is certified with an associate's degree equivalent (270 hours) in education and specialty training. A CAPA's purpose is to assist in the practice of addictions therapy under the clinical supervision of a licensed professional, as well as administrative supervision by their employer. A CAPA may perform assessments, recommend treatment, co-lead therapy groups, and lead educational groups. A CAPA may not provide individual therapy, diagnose, or lead therapy groups.

P = provisionally licensed, e.g., Provisional Professional Counselor (PPC), Provisional Clinical Social Worker (PCSW), Provisional Marriage and Family Therapist (PMFT), Provisional Addictions Therapist (PAT).

Use of the initials PPC, PCSW, PMFT, and PAT represents that the person is provisionally licensed and has met the minimum of a master's degree level of education. This individual is allowed to provide mental health services under the clinical supervision of a licensed professional, as well as administrative supervision by their employer. This person is working towards completing the experience and examination requirements for licensure.³

Other common credentials include:

NC = national certification, e.g., Nationally Certified Counselor (NCC)
AB = board certified, e.g., American Board of Professional Psychology (ABPP)

Who provides therapy?

There are many types of professionals who can provide therapy for personal issues.

Clinical psychologists focus on mental health assessment and treatment. Licensed psychologists have doctoral degrees (Ph.D., PsyD, EdD). Their training is in clinical, counseling, or school psychology. In addition, they have another one to two years of supervised clinical experience.

Clinical social workers have a masters or doctoral degree in social work (MSW, DSW, Ph.D). They often have expertise in linking clients to various services and programs in the community. They help people manage the forces that contribute to problems in living. They are also credentialed to provide psychotherapy.
Master’s level clinicians have a master’s degree in counseling or marriage and family therapy (MS, MFT). To be licensed, master’s level clinicians must meet requirements that vary by state.

Psychiatrists have a doctor of medicine degree (MD). After completing medical school, they have three to four years of residency training. Since they are medical doctors, psychiatrists can prescribe medicine.4

Regulation in Wyoming

As authorized by Wyoming Statutes, the Wyoming Mental Health Professions Licensing Board is empowered to provide for the licensure, certification and regulation of professional counselors, clinical social workers, marriage and family therapists, addictions therapists, social workers, addictions practitioners, addictions practitioner assistants and mental health workers practicing in Wyoming. The Board’s mission states that the Board is legislatively mandated to safeguard the health, safety and welfare of the citizens of Wyoming by ensuring that those individuals licensed or certified to provide these mental health services in this state are appropriately qualified.5 To contact the licensing board:

Wyoming Mental Health Professions Licensing Board
1800 Carey Ave, 4th Floor
Cheyenne WY 82002
Phone: (307) 777-3628
email: WyoMHPLB@wyo.gov

Finding a therapist

There are several ways to locate a therapist:

Personal contact: You can ask friends or your primary health care provider if they can recommend a therapist. Make sure the potential therapist can answer the questions above to your satisfaction.

On the phone: Some mental health services are listed in the phone book in the government pages. In the yellow pages, therapists may be listed under, “counseling,” “psychologists,” “social workers,” “psychotherapists,” “social and human services,” or “mental health.”

Online: Some organizations have databases that allow you to search for a Wyoming or regional therapist. Most databases provide the therapist’s credentials, areas of expertise, and types of therapy they provide. A caveat is that in some sites, the therapist needs to belong to the organization to be listed.
Some helpful web sites include:

National Board for Certified Counselors: http://www.nbcc.org/CounselorFind

American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy: http://www.therapistlocator.net/


American Psychological Association - Psychologist Locator: http://locator.apa.org/

In addition to these national sites, there are two Wyoming-specific sites that provide a comprehensive listing of mental health clinicians and facilities:

Wyoming Association of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Centers (WAMHSAC) provides in-patient care and counseling and covers the entire state: http://www.wamhsac.org/

The University Counseling Center at the University of Wyoming provides a mental health referral list for Wyoming, northern Colorado and the Denver area: http://www.uwyo.edu/ucc/index.html

In conclusion

Going through all of this can be pretty overwhelming. However, it is better to do your homework in advance and not have to waste your time, money or patience bouncing from one therapist to another. You, the client, are always in charge of the process. You have the right to refuse what your therapist is offering you. You have the right to change therapists and/or modes of therapy.
Disclaimer

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References

4. United States Department of Veterans Affairs. op. cit.
5. Wyoming Department of Administration and Information. op. cit.