

# HOW TO CHOOSE A COUNSELLOR

You have made an important choice, a potentially life-changing choice. But how do you find a great counsellor and one that works well for you? This document is designed to help you choose exactly that person. There is no such thing as the “best” counsellor – but there is a great counsellor who is best for you.

## DO YOUR HOMEWORK

You can learn a great deal about a counsellor’s training, experience, services, specializations, personality style and biases before meeting him/her by doing a little homework. By reading a counsellor’s website, brochure or book, or by attending a counsellor’s workshop, lecture or support group, you can get a sense of whether or not you’d like to work with him/her. Doing your research can save you time and money by helping you determine your compatibility with a counsellor before attending and paying for a first appointment.

## PERSONALITY MATCH

The personality match between you and your counsellor is critical. Research has shown that the quality of the relationship between the client(s) and counsellor greatly influences the success or outcome. A good personality match (or good chemistry, a trusting relationship, "a good fit", compatibility or "clicking") can help clients feel comfortable enough and safe enough to let go of their fears and risk trying new behaviours.

If you’re in crisis and need to begin treatment immediately, do not worry if you do not have the time to do your research. Most counsellors are good and some are great for the short time that you need.

If you’re currently in therapy or counselling and the relationship doesn’t feel right to you, bring it up in your sessions and try to work through it. If you can’t, do not be afraid to schedule an appointment with another therapist. Meeting with someone else will allow you to compare and contrast your experiences with both so that you can decide with whom you’d rather work.

If you are choosing between two or more counsellors, ask yourself the following questions:

1. Who is easier to talk to?
2. Who do you feel most at ease with, most yourself with?
3. Who gives you better feedback?
4. Who pushes you further?

5. Who seems to understand you and your problems best?
6. Who responds to you better?
7. Who is better able to connect events to larger issues?
8. Who of the therapists is most “unshockable”?

## DEFINING A GOOD FIT -- EVEN MORE QUESTIONS

You will work best with someone around whom you feel comfortable, safe and respected. You will work hardest when you like your counsellor, respect him/her, and believe in his/her ability to help you. You need to trust your intuition...if it doesn't feel right, it probably isn't.

While there is no litmus test for good chemistry between a counsellor and a client, here are questions you can ask yourself to help determine if the fit is right for you.

Do you feel comfortable with this counsellor? Do you find yourself getting defensive, or sharing openly? You're looking for someone you feel safe enough with to disclose your problems, thoughts, and feelings with total honesty -- and without feeling judged. If you're not comfortable enough to be truthful with your counsellor, your counsellor cannot help you.

Does the counsellor seem professional? You're looking for someone responsible and appropriate. If your counsellor forgets your appointments, dresses inappropriately, or crosses professional boundaries, you will want to find someone else.

Do you like the counsellor's style? You're looking for someone you mesh with. Is your counsellor directive or solely a sounding board, and which style do you prefer? Does your counsellor interact with you or remain silent, and which style do you prefer? Do you think your counsellor talks too much or is there room for you to talk about what you need to?

Are you getting immediate feedback? A good counsellor will start giving you useful feedback during the very first session. Do not expect miracles from one session, however, as it often it takes several sessions for a counsellor to get to know you and to fully understand your problem.

Is the therapy helping you? You're looking to gain insight about yourself and your behaviors, learn new skills, and experiment with new and more productive behaviors. If you like your counsellor but don't think the treatment is helping -- despite your commitment and hard work -- you may want to find someone else

## EXPERIENCE

When choosing a counsellor, ask if he/she has experience handling your particular problem. For example, if your current problem is a marital problem, you should choose a counsellor who is experienced with couples work. Similarly, if your current problem is a sexual problem, choose a counsellor experienced in sex therapy. The same is true for emotional complexities like depression and anxiety.

## COST OF COUNSELLING

Counsellor's fees can vary greatly, and you should choose a counsellor whose fee fits your budget. Therapy is a luxury for some -- it is not a necessary condition of survival (in most cases). But if you want more than to survive, but to thrive, paying for the luxury of good counselling is worth every penny when you emerge happier and more fulfilled. Therapy is certainly an investment of money, but the reward of living your best life is priceless. If you're not sure if you can afford to be in therapy, ask yourself if you can afford not to be.

## OFFICE LOCATION

The location of your counsellor's office is a consideration. Do you want the convenience of seeing a counsellor close to home or work? Or would you prefer to see someone across town to minimize the chance of bumping into him/her on the street? Might it be best to see a counsellor whose office is in a different community, adding anonymity and privacy to your experience (as well as affording you built-in time to prepare for and reflect on your sessions during the commute)? This is a personal choice. Take time to assess your needs. Whatever scenario you choose, make sure you feel comfortable in your counsellor's office.

## TRAINING

There are many different disciplines of therapy, and one discipline isn't inherently better or more effective than another. Psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, registered clinical counsellors, and marriage and family counsellors can all practice competent therapy, so don't focus too much on the letters (which will indicate academic degree and license) that appear after a counsellor's name. Rapport, skills and experience are more important.

There are some exceptions, of course, and your particular needs will help direct the type of counsellor you should see. For example, if you require a psychological evaluation to assess for ADHD or mental illness, you will need to see either a psychologist or a psychiatrist. If you need psychotropic medication, only psychiatrists (and other medical doctors) can prescribe. If you are involved in a court case and want to submit formal documentation before a judge, then it's important to choose a therapist at the doctorate level. Ask a counsellor before scheduling a first appointment if he/she is qualified to address your particular issue.

## REGISTRATION

It is important that your counsellor is licensed in his/her discipline. Seeing a licensed counsellor guarantees you that his/her training and experience have met the province's criteria for competent practice, and that he/she has passed a comprehensive and rigorous licensure exam.

## YOUR PART OF THE EQUATION

Finally, don't forget that you have a crucial role in the success of your therapy. Choosing a good counsellor is important. What you do with that counsellor is just as important. Therapy is not passive. Your counsellor can be the most helpful to you when you are motivated to learn, dedicated to your growth, and trusting of the therapeutic process. Clients who work hard at helping themselves have the best outcomes in therapy.

## FROM YOUR FIRST SESSION

You might wish to bring a notebook and pen with you to each session. Many clients appreciate the content of sessions and record their thoughts and ideas. Please ask your therapist if this is acceptable to her/him. As well, give yourself time before and after each session to record your thoughts. If you rush back to work or school, you may miss some of the benefits of the time you have invested in counselling.

(Adapted from an online article written by Tracy L. Wood M.Ed., LMFT)