

Finding the Right Professional

Professional counselors come in a variety of shapes, sizes, and flavors, so to speak. Such helping professionals can be found in many specialties, and there are major distinctions among them. The tips below explain some of the differences in an effort to help you locate a qualified professional:

Psychologists are doctoral-level professionals who specialize in various aspects of psychological treatment, including healing, growth, and change. Psychologists work with individuals, couples, and families.

Psychiatrists are medical doctors who usually focus on the use of medication to relieve symptoms in the treatment of seriously disruptive or highly distressing psychological problems.

Clinical social workers generally hold master's degrees in social work and address the needs of individuals and families facing life changes. They are licensed and trained in working with community resources.

Marriage and family therapists are licensed professionals who hold graduate degrees in marriage and family therapy. They treat a wide range of problems within the context of the family.

Coaches are a new type of healing professional. Coaches work to help create the kind of results you want in your life. Some coaches specialize in relationships.

Pastoral counselors are church-affiliated helpers who have theological training. Many have additional training in counseling, and some also are licensed psychologists, social workers or therapists.

Regardless of the type of professional you choose, it is important to select someone who is certified or licensed to practice his or her profession. The licensing means the practitioner meets the basic standards of his or her particular profession

Experience is the second important criteria to measure when selecting a professional. Like everyone else, therapists continue to learn as they practice, and learning pays off for clients in terms of therapeutic knowledge and skill. Helpful professionals recognize the importance of the right fit between therapist and client. As a client, you need to feel comfortable with the therapist's orientation and general approach. Also, clients reporting the most successful outcomes find their therapists to be warm, genuine, and empathic. Research also indicates that your level of involvement in the therapy process and your willingness to change are important predictors of successful outcome.

So, how do you find a well-qualified therapist (or coach) who will fit for you? Contacting a referral service is a simple approach to tapping into the pool of practitioners. Most services will list therapists by specialized areas, location, and special needs. A second approach is to ask someone you know who has had a successful therapeutic or coaching experience to recommend a practitioner.

Only through a personal consultation can you assess whether a particular therapist is right for you. Because therapist selection involves a combination of objective and intuitive experience, it may take a few meetings before you have a clear sense of the "fit." Besides checking out professional qualifications, discuss your specific needs and goals with the therapist or coach, and determine with the therapist whether she or he can work with you on the issues and concerns you want to resolve.

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