

## First Steps

The decision to begin psychotherapy can bring a mix of curiosity, fear, excitement, and a host of questions. The first question is often how do I find a therapist? It can be a daunting and time-consuming process, but there are lots of resources to help.

Depending on your degree of comfort, one option is to ask family and friends about recommendations for a therapist. They may know one through their own psychotherapy, through the experiences of other friends or family, or through social or work channels. The recommendations of others provide a starting point and some version of a “character reference”.

If the reviews are positive, contact that therapist to explore setting up an appointment. Many therapists choose to refer close friends, coworkers and family members of existing clients to other professional in order to minimize the complexities of working with related parties. If that occurs, you still come away with a name or names recommended by a professional.

Another avenue is the “find a provider” page of your insurance company. Navigate to the “mental health and substance abuse professionals” section. On many sites, you can define the geographic range of in-network providers, see if they are accepting new referrals, obtain information about their licensure type, and sometimes review a list of their specialties. Some sites also include patient ratings.

Additional avenues for locating psychotherapists include consulting with educational, occupational or religious professionals. Teachers and counselors in the school system, college counseling center professionals, employee assistance professionals, and religious leaders often interact with psychotherapists in the community. Physicians and other health care providers are also an excellent resource for recommendations.

There are also a number of websites that provide referrals to psychotherapists. When using these, it is important to remember that professionals often pay for inclusion on these listings, and that these practitioners may or may not be within your insurance network. Several include [psychologytoday.com](http://psychologytoday.com), [goodtherapy.org](http://goodtherapy.org), or [find-a-therapist.com](http://find-a-therapist.com).

Once you have a list of names, you can perform online searches of professionals to explore ratings and reviews, bearing in mind all the usual caveats about the potential abuse of online rating systems. Many professionals have websites that provide more detailed information about their approach, training, specialties, fees, and hours. Be aware that a beautiful website does not guarantee that this individual is an effective or ethical practitioner. Websites are marketing vehicles, as well as informational tools.

When people search for psychotherapists, they are often confounded by the range of professional titles and the various initials after the provider’s name. Unfortunately, there are

unscrupulous individuals who exploit the public's confusion by offering psychotherapy without having the appropriate training and educational background. Therapists who are licensed usually indicate that on their business cards, websites and other marketing materials. If there is no information about licensure, inquire directly about their status.

Why does it matter if a psychotherapist is licensed? While your personal trainer, chiropractor, massage therapist, hypnotist, academic advisor, or life coach may all have helpful skills and useful information, they have not received the required education and specific training in diagnosis, treatment planning and ethics. The ability to trust your psychotherapist is an essential ingredient in treatment, and the first warning sign of an unethical provider is their inaccurate representation of their credentials.

As a consumer, your protection rests in understanding the meaning of titles and initials, and in validating that a prospective therapist is in good standing with their licensing boards. The licensing boards establish standards of care for the purpose of protecting the consumer. In California, these include the Board of Medicine for psychiatrists ([www.mbc.ca.gov](http://www.mbc.ca.gov); 916 263-2499), the Board of Psychology for psychologists ([www.psychology.ca.gov](http://www.psychology.ca.gov); 916 263-2699), the Board of Nursing for psychiatric/mental health nurses ([www.rnbd.ca.gov](http://www.rnbd.ca.gov); 916 322-3350), and the Board of Behavioral Sciences for marriage and family therapists, social workers, and professional counselors ([www.bbs.ca.gov](http://www.bbs.ca.gov); 916 574-7830).

Being trustworthy also includes being competent. Licensed psychotherapists are required to obtain ongoing training through conferences and workshops in order to keep their license active. Unlicensed practitioners may not have updated training or continuing education requirements.

Beyond ethics and competence, there are also important financial considerations. If a psychotherapist is unlicensed, they are not able to bill your insurance company for services. Also, licensed therapists must carry malpractice insurance. It is unlikely that the unlicensed professional will carry malpractice insurance. If malpractice occurs, your options for financial redress are limited.

One exception to the licensure requirement occurs when a psychotherapist is a trainee or intern in a supervised environment, such as a clinic, hospital or professional practice. Trainees are fulfilling the requirements for licensure by obtaining supervision of their treatment by licensed professionals. While interns do not have the same level of experience in the field as those who are fully licensed, they can sometimes provide cost-effective services in a variety of settings.

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