

Making Contact

You have a list of psychotherapists in your geographic area, you have determined they are in your insurance network, and you have researched their specialties and ratings online. Perhaps you have a list of four or five names. Now what?

At this point, it is useful to call and leave each of them a message. Calling, rather than emailing, enables you to learn more about the therapist's tone and speaking style. It forms an initial impression of the therapist's personality.

Begin and end your message with your full name and telephone number. In brief terms, describe why you are calling, how you found the therapist's name, any required specialties or scheduling needs, and clear windows of time for a return call over the next two days. If you have any flexibility around scheduling, indicate that in your message as many therapists have open times in the middle of the morning or afternoon.

Most psychotherapists will return your call within 24 hours, but there are therapists who do not respond at all. You may also receive a succession of calls from therapists indicating that they do not have availability for a new client, even if the online information indicated otherwise.

This is disheartening. It is most likely to occur when you are utilizing insurance, or when you can only schedule appointments on evenings and weekends. It helps to have a personal referral to that therapist, flexibility around scheduling, and the ability to pay for therapy out of your own pocket.

If you are using health insurance and have been unsuccessful in your search for a therapist, contact your customer service representative and explain your circumstances. At that point, insurance plan representatives may initiate phone calls to providers to assist in the search. Sometimes plans will also set up "single case agreements" with out of network therapists willing to accept the plan's coverage terms.

When possible, schedule meetings with two or three psychotherapists. If you plan to use insurance, this option of meeting with different therapists is generally covered by most plans, but clarify if there are any limitations on the number of therapy contacts allowed under your particular plan. If you are covering the cost yourself, be prepared to pay for each meeting.

The process of meeting with a variety of practitioners ensures that you can explore your concerns with different therapists, and you can choose the person who offers the best fit in terms of experience and an accurate appreciation of your situation.

When you speak with the psychotherapist by phone, ask for an initial appointment and clarify any questions around the length of the meeting, insurance status, payment and paperwork. On the day of your meeting, arrive early to ensure that you have time to find the office and parking. If you plan to use insurance, bring your card with you. It also helps to have a list of your own questions for the therapist.

Often you may enter a waiting room with no receptionist. There may be a set of switches on the wall next to the therapist's name. Flip the switch to signal your arrival and use any waiting time to prepare yourself for the meeting.

The psychotherapist will begin the meeting with a brief introduction, and then likely ask you to describe the recent circumstances that prompted your decision to begin psychotherapy. The conversation that flows from there is likely to include questions about current concerns and symptoms, the history of recent events, and any losses or changes in significant relationships. You may also be asked about any prior experience in therapy and your current goals and expectations of treatment.

Your own questions might include asking about the psychotherapist's background and general level of experience, as well as their particular familiarity with your situation or needs. It is important to understand how the psychotherapist anticipates helping you, including their approach and strategies, as well as how they anticipate the therapy proceeding in terms of frequency of meetings and a timeline for improvement.

Other important issues to clarify with the psychotherapist may include policies pertaining to office policies, session cancellations, and emergency procedures. This is also a good time to discuss any questions about ethical or legal issues.

By the end of the initial meeting, or perhaps a second follow up meeting, you will have an impression of that psychotherapist approach, their level of professionalism, the usefulness of their questions, their sense of humor, their ability to convey an understanding of your circumstances, priorities and goals, and their ability to define a treatment process.

At that point, you may have the option to schedule your first psychotherapy session. You can choose to schedule, or you can give yourself a couple of days to think about your experience. If you are meeting with more than one psychotherapist, indicate that you are doing so as a courtesy.

Given the importance of the therapeutic relationship, knowing that you have made an informed choice in selecting a therapist establishes confidence in the process and in your ability to be an active participant.

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