

A Guide for Choosing a Therapist

The guide has been developed in consultation with biblical scholars, Christian psychologists, licensed Christian therapists, and professors in Christian counseling.

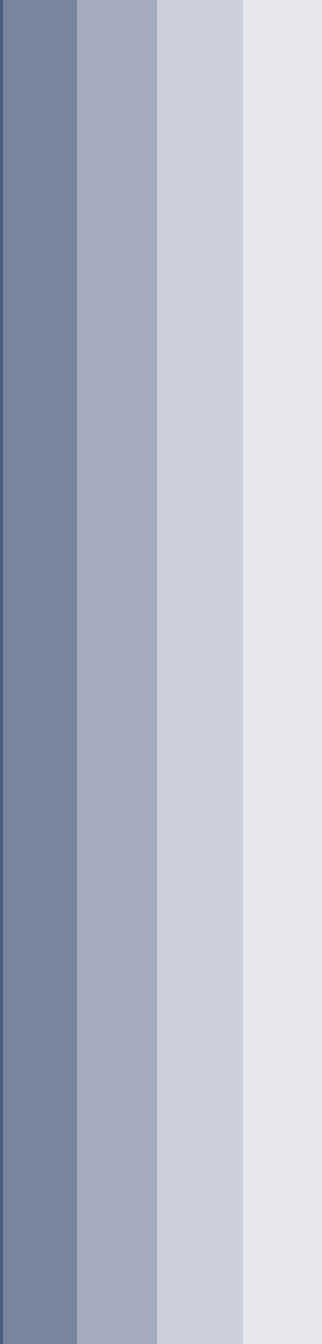
THE GUIDE HAS FOUR PARTS:

Part 01: The Therapist's Beliefs

Part 02: The Therapist's Education and Experience

Part 03: The Therapist's Approach

Part 04: Self-Reflection for You After Your Time with a Therapist

The image features a decorative header on the left side consisting of four vertical bars of varying shades of blue and grey, transitioning from dark blue on the far left to light grey on the right. The main body of the page is white.

You can ask your potential therapist these questions or seek to discover the answers as you interact with the therapist.

PART 01

Seven Questions about the Therapist's Beliefs

The words you will hear from a therapist will form you. The words a therapist shares come “out of the overflow of the heart.” So, it is wise to learn what a potential therapist believes.

Do you believe in a God who loves the people He has made?

One holy, perfect, and powerful God who loves His people so much that He sent His Son to die for them is basic for Christians. You want a therapist who believes in the existence of God and the salvation we have in Christ, which impacts their view of everything. A compassionate, trained, and effective Christian therapist can provide you with a higher level of confidence of your treatment aligning with your faith and being grounded on biblical principles.

What role does the Scripture and my faith play in treatment?

Scripture teaches that our faith in Jesus must touch every area of our lives. You want a therapist who gives guidance in accordance with your faith. Find out if he/she uses biblical passages and principles when appropriate.

What role does my faith community play in my treatment?

God makes it very clear that Christians need the regular fellowship of other Christians, and you want a therapist who will encourage you to leverage these crucial relationships to help you grow and change. Therapy for the Christian can be considered as part of the umbrella of discipleship, whether the therapist works in a church, a private practice, or a community setting, so make sure he/she is supportive of engagement in your church.

What is your standard for determining right from wrong?

As Christians, we know that the Bible is our authority for determining right from wrong and what is best for us. You want a therapist who will never counsel you away from what God has already made clear.

What do you believe is the fundamental problem people face?

Scripture teaches that the fundamental problem in our broken world is sin. Every one of us sins, is sinned against, and experiences the pain and loss of a world full of the sins of others. The brokenness of humanity's sinful position changes how life was designed, and is the ultimate cause of emotional, behavioral, and relational dysfunctions. You want a therapist who understands the pain of sin and our role in being transformed by grace.

Do you believe relationships should prioritize restoration?

Our relationships are one of the most important things about us and relationships are one of the most common reasons people seek out therapy for wisdom, healing, and help. Scripture instructs us to prioritize restoration of those relationships wherever possible, and you want a therapist who values restoration—though not always possible.

What do you believe about gender and sexuality?

Scripture teaches that God made humanity male and female, that our bodies are sacred gifts from Him, and that sex is a sacred gift for marriage between a man and a woman. These topics are highly debated today, and a therapist's view of these subjects reveals their view of Scripture's teaching and their approach with counsel toward you.

PART 02

Seven Questions about the Therapist's Education and Experience

Most therapists have a web presence with information about their work, their school, degrees, and licensure. Whether you learn these answers online or in conversations, education and experience are important aspects to know about a potential therapist.

What is your counseling degree and where did you earn it?

Typically, a license to conduct therapy requires an earned graduate degree in the counseling field.

Are you licensed to conduct therapy in my state, or are you a supervisee of someone who has a license in my state?

Licensure is state-based, so therapists cannot practice in states in which they do not have a license. This includes remote therapy as well. And there are many highly effective supervisees who are gaining supervision hours under someone else's license.

What is your license and number, and where can I look up your current standing online?

Checking a state board's online presence can tell you if the person is in good standing, or if there have been problems that need to be explained.

How long have you been conducting therapy?

There is simply no substitute for experience.

Do you have any formal training in Christian counseling?

Having coursework and training experiences in which he/she is taught by others who bring the Bible and the scientific aspects of counseling together at a professional level can result in a great deal of competence and be a significant benefit to you.

Do you have specialty training in some areas?

A counseling degree and license attest that the person can treat anyone covered by their training and licensure. The “scope of practice” information of what a license covers is available online. And specializations earned by additional training can enhance the therapist’s skill level.

What professional person or organization can I contact for a reference for you?

A good reputation is highly important in the therapeutic field. That can include a healthy and well-networked church or ministry, a professional counseling association, or a therapist with a good reputation.

PART 03

Seven Questions about the Therapist's Approach

The therapist's approach to therapy will greatly impact his/her approach to you.

What is your theoretical orientation toward therapy?

Therapists train in different approaches to people's struggles. While they may be competent in several, they generally have one or two that they primarily use. A few orientations are psychodynamic therapy, cognitive-behavioral therapy, attachment therapy, dialectical behavioral therapy, and family systems therapy. An unhelpful answer to the question would be, "I do a bit of everything."

Can you describe your approach in lay terms?

The therapist should set out a simple way of understanding his/her orientation. Make sure that there is an answer for where emotional and behavioral problems might come from. Remember that having a high temperature indicates a possible underlying infection or another cause. Your depression, anxiety, or any other difficulty didn't occur in a vacuum, but from some cause as well, and often from significant relational hurts which, over time, have become part of how you currently think, feel, and relate. Have them also explain briefly what happens during sessions to make improvement, as well as what success looks like.

Can you explain how your approach is aligned with a biblical framework?

The therapist might share a few ideas on how the approach works well with biblical principles.

What techniques do you find helpful with your approach?

Therapists can use any number of interventions to make progress with a client. A few would be interpretations, cognitive restructuring, working through past events and relationships that are significant to the issue, emotional experiential work, resolving defenses, improving one's self-talk, relevant Bible passages, and strengthening homework.

Do you support clients taking medications?

A good therapist will support the idea of medication when it is needed, and explain that often, the medication simply helps the brain to operate with clarity so that the person can make use of the talk therapy. Many times, the medication can be discontinued once the underlying issues are solved. However, unless the therapist is a psychiatrist (psychiatrists are also physicians), the therapist will not prescribe the medication but will instead refer the client to a psychiatrist for a consult to determine this.

Will this be uncomfortable? I'm already in distress.

Competent and caring therapists will let you know that you may need to face some difficult thoughts, feelings, or memories, in order to heal and change. But they will assure you that they will be there with you. They will modulate the unpleasantness as much as possible, so that it's not too overwhelming. And they will help you find support during your difficult times.

Given my situation, what would success look like with your approach?

He/she might say that the presenting problem (anxiety, depression, addiction, relationship struggle) would be significantly resolved, as well as the issues that caused it in the first place, and that it's expected that while your life and relationships will not be perfect, you will be able to have a full and purposeful existence, along with tools to keep you growing and strengthening.

PART 04

Personal Reflection

Reflecting on your personal experience with the therapist will help you discern your next steps.

As you reflect on the interview or the first session, notice if the therapist:

Helps you to be vulnerable.

Therapy only succeeds to the extent that you can be open emotionally. Therefore, the more the therapist provides a reasonably safe environment, the more you'll be able to be vulnerable at a deep level.

Is authentically empathic.

Competent therapists attune to your emotions, especially the more painful ones. They understand, and you can feel that they are present with you in your "well of pain."

Is honest with you.

The therapist is not only caring, but clear as well. He or she conveys truths that may be difficult but are ultimately healing.

Models what a healthy relationship is as a template for improving your own relationships.

Good therapists do this by being, in themselves, full of grace and truth with you in the session. They provide God's relational nutrients by being present, conveying the good, providing reality, and calling you to action.

Listens more than he/she talks.

You need a therapist's care, insights, and suggestions. But you and your situation are the main thing in the session. The therapist must be skilled at focusing on you and what's going on with you. If a therapist does too much teaching or spends significant time talking about his/her story, these can be a problem.

Explores deeper dynamics that could be driving your presenting problem.

This might include current stressors, significant losses, trauma, problems trusting others, difficulty setting boundaries, perfectionism, shame, guilt, feeling one-down, etc. This helps you understand the "why." The statement, "It seems you're really anxious" is more about the presenting problem and not the cause, and is not very helpful.

Conveys a hope that is biblical, healing, and practical.

The feeling of hope is not necessarily rooted in the guarantee of your circumstance improving, but in the hope of being given character growth, healing, and practical tools that result in a transformed life. Ultimately, your therapist should point to the hope offered in the grace of God that promises to redeem and restore all things.

