



Valley Center Counseling, Inc.

How to Select a Psychotherapist

What is a psychotherapist?

A psychotherapist is an individual that has been extensively trained to provide mental health services. They generally have at least a Master Degree from an accredited University. Not all college curriculums are accredited by National Psychotherapist Organizations, such as the National Association for Social Workers, or by the Board of Behavioral Science (BBS) – this is the Board that issues and monitors professional licenses in California.

What services do psychotherapists provide?

All licensed psychotherapists are trained to provide mental health services for depression and anxiety issues in adults. Many specialize in couple, family, elderly, children, adolescents, eating disorders, grief and bereavement, sexual disorders, infertility, women's issues, gay and lesbian issues, to name just a few. These specialties are obtained after completing their graduate studies.

Are all psychotherapists the same?

No. There are many graduate programs offered but they mainly fall into five categories: MD, PhD/PsyD, MS, MSSW and MFT. All are trained to provide psychotherapy but each has special training. MD's are medical doctors who have gone through medical school and then many years of residency to obtain psychiatrist standing. In addition to providing psychotherapy they can also prescribe psychotropic medications,

like antidepressants, tranquilizers, antipsychotics and more. Some medical internists can also prescribe these drugs however; they do not have the years of training in mental health issues like a psychiatrist. It would be like going to an internist or family doctor for a heart disease – would it not be better to go to a cardiologist?

PhDs and PsyDs are both doctorate degrees and generally take five years of graduate work to complete. Many of the PhD programs are research driven and provide extensive training in psychological testing. The PsyD programs are mainly focused on school psychology. There are exceptions to the latter two statements.

MS is a Masters Degree in Psychology. This involves two years of graduate work in general psychology.

MSW or MSSW are Master Programs in Clinical Social Work that involve 2-3 years of graduate work with extensive internships in a wide variety of settings like: psychiatric hospitals, hospices, schools, general hospitals, nursing homes, and social agencies. These professionals are trained in the *General System Theory*, which simply put, is the study of individuals in families, communities and societies.

MFT are marriage and family therapists. The graduate programs involve at least two years of graduate school with internships to fine-tune their skills.

So which do you choose?

All are qualified to provide psychotherapy. Most psychiatrists no longer do psychotherapy but focus on medication management (there are some who do but

they will generally be more expensive than the other degrees). Most psychotherapists work hand-in-hand with a good psychiatrist (or two) to handle any medication requirements.

If you want psychological testing then it is important to go to a PhD that is specifically trained to perform and interpret these tests.

For other psychotherapy issues, all the degrees listed will be qualified. Below are ten key questions to ask.

1. Are they licensed in California?

It takes at least two years of postgraduate work to even apply for licensing. The candidate must also have taken several advanced courses to apply. Once they qualify they must pass a Board examination.

A therapist cannot practice in a state they are not licensed.

2. Is their license in good standing?

All you need to do to determine this is to go to the Board of Behavioral Sciences (BBS) website at: www.bbs.ca.org.

3. What college did they graduate from and with what degree(s)?

Make sure that it is an accredited University. It is important to note that therapists cannot be licensed in California unless they are a graduate from an accredited institution.

4. How long have they been licensed?

This will help you to determine the number of years of professional experience.

5. What type of license do they have?

Make sure the license they have is actually a psychotherapy license. You can check with the BBS.

6. How long have they been in private practice?

Therapists can be licensed and not be in private practice. They may have worked at an agency or hospital. Why is the length in private practice important? It will tell you their level of experience in running the private practice for example, how to handle insurance companies and billing.

7. What are their specialties?

You want their specialties to match your problems. For example: if you are depressed you want someone who knows how to treat depression or if you have an eating disorder, you want a therapist who has expertise with this type of problem.

8. What are their fees?

It is important to know how much the therapy will cost. They should also be able to give you an estimate of the number of sessions that will be needed to treat your problem.

9. Will they bill your insurance?

Some therapist will do the billing for you, others will not.

10. What educational courses have they completed in the last two years?

This will tell you whether the therapist is continuing their education. BBS requires a certain amount of ongoing professional training to renew a license. Most therapists have a list of the courses they have taken. If they don't that would be a negative flag and you may not want to make an appointment.