



Choosing a Therapist

Therapists utilize a variety of approaches, which can potentially leave those seeking support in times of distress feeling uncertain or confused. While some therapists take a more directive stance or problem-solving approach, others work to understand deeper underlying feelings, explore meaning and authenticity, and focus on patterns in relationships. The goal of this document is to help you reflect on the various differences in therapists and think about factors you may want to consider when choosing a therapist who practices from depth, values insight, and prioritizes the importance of relationships and genuine connection.

What is a therapist who practices from depth, insight, and relationship?

Therapists who work from this perspective appreciate how each person is a complex individual. They don't want to squeeze people into boxes, so they usually don't categorize human problems mainly in terms of symptoms or superficial forms of diagnosis. Instead, these therapists likely view symptoms as a reflection of underlying problems, and getting to the root cause is key. Getting to root causes means focusing on and understanding deeper emotional experiences, problems and dissatisfactions in relationships, repeating patterns of finding oneself stuck or unhappy.

Evidence-based research has shown that therapies of depth, insight and relationship are highly effective, in both the short-term and long-term. Indeed, many approaches can offer short-term symptom relief, but these are the only treatments where the benefits can extend well into the future, even after the treatment ends.

Therapy sessions typically occur at least once a week, and the treatment can be time limited or open-ended in nature. These types of therapy explore facets of the self we may not be fully aware of; working with an objective, empathic therapist can help identify these blindspots that we all have. In order to better understand how you relate to others, a focus may be on early childhood experiences and how these experiences continue to affect us into adulthood. Understanding the past is a key to changing current life behaviors.

Additional areas of focus may include how you think and feel about yourself, your goals and desires in life, or self-discovery with the goal of helping to better understand the

meaning of existing. Instead of limiting the work to reshaping thoughts (cognitions), therapies of depth, insight, and relationship examine the whole person, looking at the entirety of one's life and experiences.

Types of therapists who work from this framework

Therapists who practice from this perspective can be clinical social workers, counselors, psychologists, or psychiatrists who do therapy in addition to medication management. While therapists are introduced to a variety of theoretical orientations during their graduate training, those who practice from depth, insight, and relationship gravitate to psychodynamic, psychoanalytic, relational, existential, humanistic and interpersonal approaches to the therapy process. Some have even undergone extensive post-graduate training. In the case of psychoanalysts, this can be upwards of 5-10 years of additional coursework after the completion of their degree, as well as their own psychoanalysis. Most of these therapists have also had their own therapy, so they deeply understand and appreciate what it feels like to go to therapy.

Benefits of psychotherapy with a focus on insight, depth, and relationships

- Focuses on the root causes of emotional distress, in addition to providing symptom relief
- Benefits of the therapy increase over time and can stay with you well past the end of the treatment
- Encourages free and open expression that is led by the client -- you get to set the pace
- Emphasis on personality and relationships while acknowledging the complexity of human behavior

What should I ask at the beginning of treatment?

It is not only perfectly reasonable, but highly recommended, to ask anyone you are thinking about meeting with how they see the process of change, what theoretical orientations they use in their work, and what to expect if you work together. This can include inquiring about frequency and duration of meetings, out of session communication, or confidentiality. It's also absolutely reasonable to inquire about fees, insurance, and training/qualifications.

While change in therapy can take time, you should have a sense of how you feel speaking with your therapist after a few meetings. It can often help to talk this through in the initial meetings and explore whether it feels like a good fit. Therapy can be a significant undertaking and major investment of time, money, and energy, so it's important to feel understood and seen. Psychotherapy is not a "one size fits all" treatment, but rather an individualized process between you and your therapist.

How to connect with a relationally based therapist?

- If you're searching for a therapist on a web-based directory, make sure to indicate in your search criteria that you're seeking someone who works from a psychodynamic, psychoanalytic, relational, humanistic, existential, or interpersonal framework. This is often listed under "types of therapy."
- Contact a local community health center and inquire about therapists who are relationally-based. Community health centers often have a variety of therapists on staff who work from diverse theoretical perspectives.
- Call a local university and ask to speak with someone in the psychology, counseling, or social work department to ask about possible referrals. Many universities also have on-site counseling centers that may be able to provide you with a referral to a trusted colleague.
- See if family, friends, colleagues, or your primary care provider has a name for a referral
- Contact the Psychotherapy Action Network and we would be glad to assist!

Benjamin Schwartz, PsyD
Chicago, IL