SELF empowerment

How to choose a mental health professional

BBS
Board of Behavioral Sciences

STATE OF CALIFORNIA
dca
DEPARTMENT OF CONSUMER AFFAIRS

It's your decision

Choosing a therapist

A strong relationship with your therapist is vital to successful mental health treatment. If you use mental health services in California, you should feel comfortable asking some basic questions before choosing a therapist. The Board of Behavioral Sciences has prepared this booklet to help you make an informed decision.

Questions to ask a potential therapist

You may want to interview several candidates before making your choice. Start by giving the therapist a brief description of why you are seeking mental health services. Then, ask the therapist for information such as:

- The type of license held (if not yet licensed, the name and license type of the therapist's supervisor).
- If the therapist has experience treating issues similar to yours.
- What specific training the therapist has related to your situation.
- How and when the length of treatment is determined.
- Whether the therapist practices from a particular "model" of treatment, and if so, a brief description of that treatment and what it involves.

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Questions to ask a potential therapist continued from page 1

- If he or she has forensic experience (this question applies only if you need services because of a legal action, such as a child custody dispute).
- Whether the therapist takes your insurance; and if not, the cost of therapy sessions. If the cost is not affordable, you may want to ask if they offer a sliding scale.
- If medication might be needed, whether he or she can make a referral to a psychiatrist or other physician.
- If the therapist can accommodate your schedule for therapy appointments.
- What the office policies are regarding cancellations, vacation coverage, and phone calls between sessions.

The intake and assessment process

The intake and assessment process usually consists of one to three sessions in which you talk with your therapist about your current situation and needs. Your individual and family histories are also discussed at this time. The therapist should discuss insurance and fees, privacy, and the limits of confidentiality. These meetings should give you a good idea of your therapist's style and whether he or she is a good match for your background, personality, clinical needs, and goals. If you are not comfortable with the therapist's style, you may wish to search for another therapist. Feeling comfortable with your therapist is very important to the success of your treatment.

Treatment plan

At the end of the assessment process, your therapist should give you a working diagnosis and treatment plan. This plan should include a recommendation about the number of sessions and referrals for other services that you may need to effectively resolve your issues (i.e., referral for medication, testing of a child with learning problems, etc.). You and your therapist should work together on your treatment plan. Therapy is a process that requires time and effort from both you and your therapist.

Client rights

You, as a client, have a right to:

- Request and receive information about the therapist's professional capabilities, including licensure, education, training, experience, professional association membership, specialization and limitations.
- Be treated with dignity and respect.
- A safe environment, free from sexual, physical, and emotional abuse.
- Ask questions about your therapy or other services from your provider.
- Decline to answer any question or disclose any information you choose not to reveal.
- Request and receive information from the therapist about your progress toward your treatment goals.

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Client rights continued from page 3

- Know the limits of confidentiality and the circumstances in which a therapist is legally required to disclose information to others.
- Know if there are supervisors, consultants, students, or others with whom your therapist will discuss your case.
- Decline a particular type of treatment, or end treatment without obligation or harassment.
- Refuse electronic recording.
- Request and (in most cases) receive a summary of your records, including the diagnosis, your progress, and the type of treatment.
- Report unethical and illegal behavior by a therapist.
- Receive a second opinion at any time about your therapy or therapist's methods.
- Have a copy of your file transferred to any therapist or agency you choose.

Mental health professionals in California

There are many different types of licensed mental health professionals. In California, they are regulated by different agencies. It's a good idea to be familiar with all of them so that you can make an informed decision.

Check the license of the mental heath professional you choose before your first visit. Here's a list of the types of mental health professionals, the agencies that license them, and their contact information:

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Mental health professionals in California continued from page 4

Licensed Marriage and Family Therapists, Associate Marriage and Family Therapists

Board of Behavioral Sciences
(916) 574-7830
www.bbs.ca.gov

Licensed Clinical Social Workers, Associate Clinical Social Workers

Board of Behavioral Sciences
(916) 574-7830
www.bbs.ca.gov

Licensed Professional Clinical Counselors, Associate Professional Clinical Counselors

Board of Behavioral Sciences
(916) 574-7830
www.bbs.ca.gov

Licensed Psychologists, Psychological Assistants, Registered Psychologists

Board of Psychology
(916) 574-7720
www.psychology.ca.gov

Psychiatrists

Medical Board of California
(800) 633-2322
www.mbc.ca.gov

Psychiatric Technicians

Board of Vocational Nursing and Psychiatric Technicians
(916) 263-7800
www.bvnpt.ca.gov

Psychiatric Mental Health Nurses

Board of Registered Nursing
(916) 322-3350
www.rn.ca.gov

Licensed Educational Psychologists

Board of Behavioral Sciences
(916) 574-7830
www.bbs.ca.gov

How do I find a therapist in my area?

- Internet search engines can help you locate therapists or clinics in your area. Try searching "(your city/county low-cost mental health services)" or "(your city/county mental health therapists)".
- Dial "2-1-1" or visit www.211.org for resources and referrals.
- Visit www.namica.org and search for your local chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness.
- Visit Mental Health America's website at www.mentalhealthamerica.net/finding-help.

If you have health insurance, find out what mental health services (for example, inpatient, outpatient, or substance abuse) your plan covers. Many health insurance plans use some form of managed care, such as an HMO. Call your insurance company, read your Evidence of Coverage booklet, or visit your health plan's website for more information.

You can still get treatment if you do not have health insurance, or if your insurance does not cover mental health. Community-based mental health programs offer low-cost or sliding-scale (income-based) fees. You may have to do some research to find these services, however.

Telehealth (online or telephone therapy)

Mental health professionals may offer therapy sessions online, through an app, via text or over the telephone under certain conditions. While telehealth is not ideal for all situations, it makes treatment available to those who may not otherwise be able or willing to receive mental health care. Any therapist providing telehealth to a client in California must be licensed in California. The therapist is required to disclose the fee for services, how and to whom the fee will be paid, methods used to ensure confidential communications, and the risks and benefits of receiving therapy via telehealth.

Where else can I get information?

The Department of Managed Health Care, the Department of Insurance, and the Office of the Patient Advocate can answer questions about your health care plan. Visit them online for more information.

Department of Managed Health Care:
www.dmhc.ca.gov

Department of Insurance:
www.insurance.ca.gov

Office of the Patient Advocate:
www.opa.ca.gov

About the Board of Behavioral Sciences

We protect you in several ways, including:

- Ensuring high standards of licensees through education, professional experience, and examination requirements.
- Investigating consumer complaints and bringing appropriate action.
- Giving you access to valuable information and resources.

Filing a complaint

We review all complaints regarding our licensees and registrants. If you have questions about how to file a complaint, please visit our website at www.bbs.ca.gov, or call the Board's Enforcement Unit at (916) 574-7868.

Our Consumer Complaint form and instructions are available in the "Consumers" section of our website. These forms can also be sent to you upon request.

For more information

Call, write, or visit us online at:
Board of Behavioral Sciences
1625 North Market Blvd., Suite S-200
Sacramento, CA 95834
(916) 574-7830
www.bbs.ca.gov

Disclaimer: The questions and recommendations contained in this brochure are for the purpose of educating consumers about typical patient experiences with mental health treatment. Every individual's experience with mental health treatment is unique. This brochure offers suggestions only and your specific treatment experience may differ from these descriptions. Differences are to be expected and do not necessarily mean that your provider is not following a responsible treatment course.

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