

How to Find a Mental Health Provider

written by Tim Jennings, M.D. | January 16, 2018



This week, I received an email with this question: “How can I find a counselor in my area that reasons and believes as I do?”

I am often asked to recommend a counselor, therapist, or psychiatrist for people living in various locations throughout the country. I have made it a policy not to recommend a specific provider unless I know him or her personally. However, the following are some guidelines you can use to find a mental health provider in your area best suited to your needs.

1. Determine what level of provider you need:

- For instance, do you need medication for mental health issues? Then you should be looking for a psychiatrist, not a psychologist, counselor, or life coach.
- Do you need someone to treat an adult, child, or adolescent? Many providers treat only adults or only children and adolescents; knowing this can narrow your search.
- Are you seeking individual or marriage counseling?
- Are you seeking a specific type of treatment, such as cognitive therapy, group therapy, dialectical behavioral therapy?
- Are you seeking treatment for a specific problem, such as PTSD or bipolar disorder? Then seek a

provider with experience in the area you need.

- Are you seeking care for an aging family member? Then inquire if the provider is experienced with the problems of aging and dementia.

2. Identify other factors in your decision-making:

- How far can you travel to see the provider?
- Can you afford out-of-network care, or must you stay within your insurance panel?
- What level of confidentiality do you desire, and what level will you receive at each facility?

3. Determine any other variables important to you:

- Do you want a male or female provider—or does it not matter?
- Do you want a provider who holds similar values (e.g., shares your religious beliefs)?
- Do you want a provider who is capable of integrating holistic and alternative medicine elements into their practice?
- Do you want a psychiatrist who will not only prescribe meds, but if needed will also do therapy, or do you prefer therapy by a psychologist, social worker, or another counselor?
- Do you want a provider with a certain racial, cultural, or political background?
- Does the provider speak your native language or not.

4. Get input from trusted sources:

- Ask your pastor, friends, and co-workers if they know of providers they could personally recommend?
- Ask your primary care provider who they would recommend and with whom their other patients have had good outcomes.
- Don't trust online reviews of mental health providers! Online reviews are typically skewed to the negative because angry patients will vent while satisfied patients either don't think about going online to rate the provider or fear loss of confidentiality and don't make online reviews. And those disgruntled with mental health services are often unhappy when they are faced with issues they would prefer to avoid. Meaning, the therapist was likely doing exactly what the patient needed, but the patient didn't want to deal with it. Also, there are many people struggling with addictions who will be angry when they don't get the prescription they are seeking. Realize mental health providers are prohibited from responding to public criticism and providing evidence that would put the negative feedback in a different light.
- A better source to check than patient feedback forums is the state licensing boards and the professional associations to see if any actions have been taken to restrict, redirect, or discipline a potential provider.
- Ensure the provider is licensed by the state and is in good standing.
- Check to see if the provider is board certified in his or her field.
- Inquire if the provider served in any leadership capacity in his or her field and is respected by their peers.
- Has he or she published articles, books, or other research?
- Realize advertisements are advertisements—paid for by the provider, and just because someone

advertises they are a Christian provider, doesn't mean they are the best provider for you. Consider the other elements and get input from trusted sources.

5. Once you have the answers to the above, it's time to make a decision:

- If you must stay within your insurance panel, then get a list of providers on your panel and only evaluate those providers.
- If you must stay within a certain distance from your home, then only evaluate those within that radius.
- If you know you want a provider of a certain gender only, then eliminate from consideration the other providers.
- Once you have gone through these easily identifiable factors, with the remaining list get the input from friends, doctors, pastor; then check their credentials and select a provider and make an appointment.

Finally, in your initial appointment, not only is the provider evaluating you, but you are also to be evaluating them. Ask any questions you have about their methods, beliefs, values, policies, etc. Assess your comfort with them, then decide whether this provider is a good fit for you or not. If not, then go to another until you find one with whom you are comfortable working.

If you end up with a therapist that suggests an activity, intervention, or "therapy" that makes you uncomfortable, ask the provider to explain the rationale behind the recommendation, any evidence to its benefit, and the potential risks. If you are still unsure, tell the provider you will have to think about it. Then go home, do some research, get input from others, and then decide whether that therapy and therapist are right for you.

And don't forget to pray for wisdom and God's guidance in this selection process!