

Picking a Therapist is just like Dating

(It's all about the Chemistry)

By Joanne Flom, L.C.S.W.

Therapy, like dating, is all about chemistry. You may go on a blind date with someone who seems great on paper – who went to the right school, drives the right car, is in the right career – but when you meet them in person, there is no connection. Similarly, you may get referred to a therapist who went to the top school, is highly credentialed, has a specialization in “your particular issue”, but when you meet, you can’t imagine pouring your heart out to them, let alone developing any chemistry.

The term chemistry can be defined in any number of ways: a level of comfort, a sense of trust, or feeling safe. It may take several dates with your love interest or several sessions with a therapist to figure out if there is any chemistry between you, but after a few encounters you should be able to tell if you could open up to this person.

In finding the right therapeutic fit, there are some key things to be aware of during these initial sessions. The desire to find someone you “click” with is important, but keep in mind that it is unrealistic to think you will ‘click’ instantly. Like all relationships, the therapeutic relationship, has to be nurtured before it can become meaningful. Within the first several sessions you will get a sense of how comfortable you feel with this person and if you think they can help get to the core of the issues. It may be helpful to agree on a timeframe (4-6 weeks) at which point you both discuss how things are going in your treatment. It is also important during this trial period, not to obsess over whether treatment is working but rather, focus on if you like the therapist and feel they will be able to help you.

Look for someone who is experienced and broadly trained so that they can offer alternatives during treatment. In other words, like most relationships, you are looking for someone who is flexible in their approach with you. For example, if you are suffering from depression you want someone to explore relationship patterns, nutritional deficits, sleep deprivation, life stressors, medication side-effects, and/or past experiences that may be impacting you. This is in part why many practitioners are “eclectic” in their approach, that is, they may have a theoretical orientation that they prefer, but they use many different approaches and techniques to fit the needs of the client.

Like any good relationship, open communication is important in building a strong foundation of trust. While sessions may initially feel uncomfortable and may even be met with resistance on your part, you eventually want to find yourself getting curious about what is making you think, feel, and behave in certain ways and how various aspects of your life are related in ways you hadn’t considered. It is important to communicate openly and honestly with your therapist so that they can offer you the appropriate treatment.

People enter treatment for many different reasons. In general, they enter because they have become lost or stuck, or their feelings or behaviors are out of control and it is imperative that you feel you are getting to the core of the issue that brought you into therapy to begin with. If you walk out of those initial sessions with no sense of this, bring it up with the therapist. It may be that your resistance is too great for therapy at this point; it may be that this particular therapist in some way puts you on guard making it difficult for you to feel comfortable opening up, or, it may be that you simply feel no chemistry with the therapist. In each of these cases, there may be alternative things a therapist can do to help you through this; but if you feel there is no change, nor resolution possible, **find another therapist!**

Until someone can perfect the concept of *therapy-match.com*, the search for a therapist begins with referrals. Consult your doctor, nurse practitioners and friends and check

local phone books and internet reference pages. Keep in mind that it is important to find someone who is licensed. Licensure is reserved for psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers and counselors. Once you have a list of referrals, contact them by phone and ask questions that will give you a sense if you would feel comfortable with and have confidence in them and whether or not you want to make an initial appointment. Such questions include: What is their background (experience and education)? Have they worked with clients similar to how you describe yourself? Do they have a specific theoretical approach? With some contacts you will know immediately if they are not worth pursuing, and with others, you may want to give them a chance. With any personal decision, you have to trust your own response to the person involved— just like in dating.

Like many relationships, therapy does not come with a guarantee. “Failed” therapy can be like a failed relationship – if it isn’t working and it’s not worth working on, then it’s time to part ways. “Break-ups”, of any kind are difficult, but we usually learn something from the experience about ourselves. The last thing you want to do is go to therapy to work on your relationship with your *therapist*. So, be honest with yourself and refrain from staying in a relationship that really isn’t working.

Finally, it is not uncommon for people to change therapists. Try not to get discouraged and continue your search until you find that “special someone” that clicks with you. Like dating, finding a therapist involves taking a risk – a risk that could change your life for the better.

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Motivational Moves

If you had to summarize what motivational speakers are always motivating about in one statement, it would be: *successful people do things that others don't*. Whether it's getting up earlier than usual to accomplish something or working late into the night; *success comes to those who do things consistently and differently than others*.

The interesting thing about listening to motivational speakers or reading insightful books is the experience makes you think about what's working and what isn't working in your life. Sometimes it comes down to the same message you've heard or seen a million times before, but put in a different way that suddenly makes you click. Other times, it's not even *what* you may be listening to, seeing or hearing, but *when* the message comes to you – at the exact time when you're in that special place where thought and action become an amicable duo. (Dare we say, ‘ready for a change’?) In either case, cultivating a productive and positive state of mind is one of, if not the best thing we can do for ourselves. In other words, psyche UP, not out.

One of our favorite psyche UPs, comes from motivational guru, Anthony Robbins. He tells a story of how he accomplished doing something he didn't want to do, but had to, by figuring out how to do it in a pleasing manner. At the end of a long day, Robbins had hundreds of phone messages to return and was overwhelmed at the thought of doing so until he figured out he could have a glass of wine and sit in his Jacuzzi with a cordless phone dialing away. OKAY, it's a rich 'n famous metaphor, but the premise is great. The moral of the story is: *find your Jacuzzi and make it work for you.* ■ CWM

If your attention is focused on the obstacles to obtaining what you desire, it is no longer concentrating on the means to obtain your desire.

–Dr. Joseph Murphy

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