

How to Choose a Therapist That is Right for You

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The law enforcement field is a culture all its own and that can present unique challenges when looking for a therapist. Finding a clinician who understands the law enforcement culture is the first necessity when developing a client/therapist relationship. As a member of law enforcement you have been highly trained to handle a variety of difficult situations. But when it comes to emotional situations, you might not have the tools you need to find the support and direction you are looking for.

Working in law enforcement, you are tested in many ways, every day. At some point you might find you are also facing challenges at home or in your personal life. It may be complexities in your marriage, the stress of a teenage child, or trouble in your work. If you have decided to see if therapy can improve your current situation; you are left with the question of how to choose a therapist. It is our hope that this article will provide you with information that helps you to find the right therapist. Here are some of our suggestions:

Ensure that the clinician is licensed. Licensed clinicians will have a license number on their business card or advertisement. You can also check them out by contacting the Board of Psychology or Board of Behavioral Sciences. Life coaches are a growing trend and can be very helpful. However, if you work with a life coach that is *not* a licensed clinician, that relationship is not protected by client/therapist confidentiality and communication is *not* considered privileged. If you are interested in coaching services, many licensed clinicians can provide coaching services that include the protection of privileged communication.

Therapists come in all shapes and styles. The key is to find the one that is the most compatible with you. We will use the term therapist or clinician to refer to a licensed mental health worker. Mental health clinicians include master's level Marriage and Family Therapists (MFT) and Licensed Clinical Social Workers, (LCSW), doctoral level Psychologists (PhD, PsyD) or Psychiatrists (MD). Each educational level has something different to offer. All of them have the skill to offer psychotherapy or counseling. Psychologists have additional training in diagnosis, assessment, and testing. A psychiatrist is a medical doctor who specializes in the treatment of mental disorders and typically prescribes medication.

Interview your prospective therapist. The number one factor in the success of therapy is the client therapist relationship. If you don't feel you can trust your therapist, they can't help you. You may have to shop around. Try not to wait until you are in a crisis. Interview potential therapists and find someone who "clicks" with you; it is worth the effort. Here are some potential questions to ask:

- Has the therapist worked with law enforcement personnel before or how familiar are they with law enforcement lifestyle/work challenges? This may or may not be important to you depending on your reason for seeking treatment.

- What are the therapist's specialties, level of training and experience? If you are looking for a therapist to help with your teenager's academic problems, you may not need a trauma specialist.
- What are their fees? Do they work with your department's Employee Assistance Program? Do they accept your health insurance? Be aware that using your health insurance for mental health treatment affords you a lower level of confidentiality. For example, the client must be diagnosed with a mental illness in order for the treatment to be "medically necessary" and approved for coverage by most health insurance companies. Insurance companies generally require the therapist to disclose the diagnosis and details of the treatment in order to provide coverage. Educate yourself about the limits of confidentiality when using your health insurance and determine if you are comfortable with that level of disclosure. The website listed below is one source of information regarding the differences between private-pay and insurance paid therapy:
http://www.therapynetwork.net/therapy_self_pay.html.
- Ask about the therapist's office hours. Often Law Enforcement hours conflict with nine to five operations. If that is your case, ask if the therapist can accommodate your unique schedule. Sometimes your initial assessment will be during traditional hours, but your therapist will schedule future appointments at more convenient times. Some clinicians offer telephone appointments.
- If you have traditional values or strong religious beliefs, talk to your potential therapist and make sure your values will be respected. This can be especially important when working on parenting issues in therapy.

Just because you start with a therapist does not mean you have to stay with them. Now we are not saying that if the therapist points out your unhealthy behaviors you should look for another therapist. But, if you find that the therapist's style or personality interferes with what you are trying to accomplish, then the relationship is not working. Even if this therapist came highly recommended, if the therapy is not working well *for you*, ask for a referral.

Your job is not to educate your therapist about the realities of police work. If you find that your therapist is not able to handle the stark, sometimes grim, realities of your daily life experiences, find someone else. It is counterproductive to go to someone for help that you feel the need to shelter or protect. There are plenty of clinicians that will be better suited to help you.

A therapist working with law enforcement personnel should be aware that confidentiality and privilege are essential aspects of trust and building a strong bond between officer and therapist. Another factor that may affect your comfort level in therapy is the location of the office. Perhaps the office is too close to your work, too near the methadone clinic, or lacking the anonymity you desire.

Ask around or ask one of your peer support members for therapist referrals. If you're uncomfortable disclosing your own issues, you can always say it is for your

spouse or children. Maybe others in the office have been in a similar situation. Referrals can be a good source of information.

We hope this information has been helpful and has provided you some useful tools for getting help when you need it. Additional resources are available at www.solutionbasedcounseling.com. The cultural differences between Law Enforcement and the field of psychology are real, but not insurmountable. Mental health clinicians can be very useful in dealing with the challenges you face every day. As law enforcement personnel you have been taught to survive in very difficult situations, this is an opportunity to thrive not merely survive.