



Counseling Guide

Guide to finding a person-centered therapist

What type of counselor should I choose?

When choosing a counselor, it is important to keep in mind their "therapeutic orientation" - this is the overall philosophy and approach to conducting counseling, and it will impact the way that the counselor works with you. While the choice is yours, FuelEd recommends a therapeutic orientation that is aligned with that of the organization: a humanistic, person-centered (also known as client-centered) approach. This is founded on the belief that the best growth happens when we are provided with a relationship characterized by empathic understanding, unconditional positive regard, acceptance, and genuineness. Human beings learn best in nurturing relationships where we are accepted, understood, and encouraged to confront challenges. Relationships that are empathic, accepting and genuine create a space for us to express our thoughts and feelings, achieve a better understanding of our own inner worlds, and become the best version of ourselves.

In contrast to other types of therapy which focus on the idea that people change when they can analyze their thoughts and behaviors, person-centered therapy (and FuelEd) focuses on the belief that people grow and change when they have the opportunity to experience a secure relationship. Instead of a counselor emphasizing the analysis of your self-talk, requiring homework, or recommending readings, FuelEd suggests instead finding a counselor whose main job will be to provide a secure attachment for you, a place where you can feel safe, seen, soothed, and secure. Your relationship with your counselor provides a way for you to better understand how you relate to others.

How do I find a counselor?

You can always ask friends for recommendations, but there are also resources to help you find a counselor. FuelEd suggests using several resources ([listed here](#)) to review counselor profiles. There are counselors on this list and a listing of websites where you can search on your own. You can search easily and effectively based on your location, price range, and the type of mental health services you would like.

In order to find a list of candidates with a person-centered style of counseling, here are some keywords you can search or look out for when reviewing a therapist's profile:

- Person-centered
- Client-centered
- Emotionally-focused therapy
- Attachment therapy
- Psychodynamic

Probably very few therapists will list all of these approaches, but most person-centered therapists will list several of them. After you choose a few, look at their websites and see if you think you could work with them.

What should I look for in a potential counselor?

You now have a list of potentials. In order to establish whether the potential therapist is a fit for you and with this philosophy, schedule a 10-15 minute introductory phone session or an in-person session. Some therapists offer lower-cost or free initial sessions, but some don't. Whether or not they offer free/reduced initial sessions is no reflection on their competency or their level of client care.

Notice their preferences in terms of populations or areas that are important for you. This information may be listed on one of the listing sites, but may also be found on their personal websites. For instance, if you really want a therapist who treats eating disorders, look for that. Please note, however, that just because a therapist doesn't list an area of specialty doesn't mean that they don't have experience in that area. Take comfort in knowing that it is an ethical principle of all therapists to inform you if they do not have the expertise necessary to help you.

If you are able to schedule a chat with them, ask them a few questions. Here are some questions you can ask the therapist if you would like to find a therapist who operates from a person-centered philosophy.

(continued)

If you are able to schedule a chat with them, ask them a few questions. Here are some questions you can ask the therapist if you would like to find a therapist who operates from a person-centered philosophy.

- "Can you tell me about your theoretical orientation? I'm looking for a person-centered therapist."
- "How important is the relationship between you and me in the work we will do together?"
- "Can you tell me about your hours? What is your cancellation policy? How much do you charge? Do you offer a sliding scale?"

After your first interaction, evaluate the following:

1. **Safety:** Overall, how safe do you feel with the therapist? Trust your gut. If you don't like the therapist, your course of therapy will probably not be fruitful.
2. **Feeling Seen:** Did you feel as if the therapist really tried to see and hear you or just give you information? A person-centered therapist will take the position that you know yourself best and will want to get to know you.
3. **Relaxed:** Person-centered therapists tend to be relaxed and avoid asking lots of questions (other than your name, etc.) They want to give you space in which to talk. Keep in mind that they may ask you more questions during this first visit than in subsequent sessions.
4. **Ethics:** You will be asked to sign a consent form at or before your first session. Make sure you understand it. Ask questions and make sure the therapist understands it as well. It contains the ethical practices to which the counselor must adhere, so it's important.

What if I felt good with the therapist at first, but am not sure if it's working now?

There are many reasons for this common feeling. It may be that things are starting to feel uncomfortable in therapy because of what you are discussing. That can make you feel very vulnerable to a person you don't know very well. Bring this up with your therapist to see if the two of you can work through this feeling together.

Similarly, you might be beginning to share feelings that you don't normally allow others to see. You can bring this up with your therapist, too. Therapy tends to have ebbs and flows, periods where things feel very intense, and periods where you can't really name what is happening but you just know you are feeling better.

It could be that this therapist is just not a good fit for you. If after four or five sessions you just don't think it's going to work for you, let your therapist know. It might be that within that conversation, your therapist is able to better understand you and you decide to continue on. Or it might be that you decide to find a different counselor.

Interpersonal orientation

As FuelEd focuses on a client-centered therapeutic stance, this does not mean that the counselor is disengaged. It becomes imperative for the counselor to communicate understanding through the empathic connection. A common misconception about non-directive therapy is that the counselor merely parrots back what the client has said. Non-directive therapy is not inactive but requires specific attunement to the client, your own self-awareness and congruence, and an ability to be present to the here-and-now experience. The counselor is charged with a high level of responsibility of communicating understanding to the client without driving the agenda.

Our therapeutic stance

“Underlying all consideration of technique must be a consistent, positive relationship between the therapist and the patient. The basic posture of the therapist to the patient must be one of concern, acceptance, genuineness, empathy. Nothing, no technical consideration, takes precedence over this attitude” (Yalom 1995, p. 106).

The therapeutic stance of a FuelEd counselor is one of empathic understanding, unconditional acceptance, and genuineness. You are providing a secure attachment for your client -- a place where the client can feel safe, seen, soothed, and secure. Maintain a quiet, calm, and alert attentiveness to convey a sense of safety and calm. Demonstrate your openness, curiosity, and concern through your focused attention and tone of voice. Utilize empathy to connect with clients and utilize your own internal experiences and perceptions to further the relationship. Listen carefully to their words, and the emotions behind them, in order to make hypotheses about their internal state. While maintaining your own boundaries, delve into another's experience using your emotions and imagination. This is a way of being rather than a way of doing.

“At the heart of our work as therapists is our ability to get centered, stay focused, and listen. For this we need to access all of our intellectual and emotional capabilities. Thinking and feeling are both vital to staying centered and gently guiding the direction of therapy” (Cozolino 2004, p. 16).

“At its most basic level, psychotherapy is an interpersonal learning environment similar in many ways to proper parenting. In both, we tend to learn best when supported by a nurturing relationship with an empathic other, while being encouraged to confront life's challenges. We also learn best in a moderate state of arousal; too little puts us to sleep and too much triggers a fight-flight state that makes positive learning impossible” (Cozolino 2004, p. 31).

(continued)

As FuelEd focuses on a client-centered therapeutic stance, this does not mean that the counselor is disengaged. It becomes imperative for the counselor to communicate understanding through the empathic connection. A common misconception about non-directive therapy is that the counselor merely parrots back what the client has said. Non-directive therapy is not inactive but requires specific attunement to the client, your own self-awareness and congruence, and an ability to be present to the here-and-now experience. The counselor is charged with a high level of responsibility of communicating understanding to the client without driving the agenda.

Clinical Guide