



## ***5 STEPs to choosing a psychologist, counsellor or psychotherapist.***

When there is conflict in your relationship, you feel isolated, alone and misunderstood; if your former partner is hostile or you are worried about your children; when you fear you are becoming estranged or experiencing alienation – seeking support from a professional can help you to develop better ways of coping and bring about positive changes in your life.

The decision to seek help or support from a psychologist, therapist or counsellor is often one which is made when you are very vulnerable or in crisis. You may feel you have nowhere to turn. You may be sceptical, but prepared to try anything as a last resort. Choosing the right practitioner is a big decision – but many people dive straight in, arranging to see the first therapist who has availability and is reasonably priced.

This 5 STEP guide aims to give you a framework for choosing a practitioner who will meet your particular needs, whilst also providing you with some assurances.

### ***STEP 1 – Choose a registered or accredited practitioner***

In the UK there is no statutory regulation of counsellors or psychotherapists. There is no legal requirement for any training and anyone can call themselves a counsellor or a psychotherapist. There are, however, a number of voluntary accreditation agencies. Practitioner psychologists, such as counselling or clinical psychologists, are subject to statutory regulation.

All practitioner psychologists must be registered with the Health and Care Professions Council. It is an offence for a practitioner psychologist to offer services if they are not registered with the HCPC. You can check the registration of any practitioner psychologist [here](#). Many practitioner psychologists are also Chartered with the British Psychological Society.

Practitioner psychologists must fulfil the training and standards set down by the HCPC before registration is granted. This training includes academic study at postgraduate level in psychological theory, psychological disorders and mental health, two or more therapeutic models, psychological assessment and therapy. Training also includes significant direct experience with clients, undertaking assessments and therapy with a mix of children, young people, adults, older adults, couples, families and groups.

The HCPC ensures that registered practitioners continue to update their knowledge, have regular supervision and adhere to ethical standards and guidelines. The HCPC has a complaints procedure and publishes all complaints and the outcomes on its web-site.

Although there is no statutory regulation of counsellors or psychotherapists, there are several well-established voluntary bodies. Each of these bodies set their own regulations for training, supervision and continued professional development. They each have their own ethical code and have a complaints procedure. In the UK, the most well-known voluntary bodies are:

BACP <http://www.bacp.co.uk/>

UKCP <http://www.psychotherapy.org.uk/>

AFT <http://www.aft.org.uk/view/index.html?tzcheck=1>

BPC <http://www.bpc.org.uk/>

By choosing a therapist who is statutorily registered with the HCPC, or voluntarily accredited or registered with one of these bodies, there is some assurance of a minimum level of knowledge, training and regulation. If your therapist is not registered or accredited, you have little recourse if you have concerns or complaints other than through legal channels.

It is perfectly acceptable to ask a practitioner for confirmation of their registration or accreditation.

### ***STEP 2 – check out their area of specialism***

The majority of counsellors, psychotherapists and practitioner psychologists are trained to work in the general area of mental health and emotional well-being – such as working with depression or anxiety. Some will develop a specialism – working with children or young people, families, with relationship difficulties, eating disorders or gender issues. They will often have completed additional training or experience in a specialist area. It is important that you ask any potential therapist about their area of expertise – how long have they worked in the area, what is their experience, what sort of outcomes and results can be expected?

In the UK, many therapists are not aware of issues such as parental alienation. This does not necessarily mean that they are unable to help you. Therapy is not about seeking advice, though the sharing of factual and practical information is often a part of therapy. A good therapist will work alongside you to gain an understanding of your experiences and difficulties from your perspective and within your relationship dynamics. They will not judge you or make assumptions. They will help you to develop an understanding of behaviours and emotions, find better ways of coping or to identify and support any changes you feel might be beneficial.

Beware any therapist who guarantees success. Psychological therapy is a very individual, personal process. Whilst evidence suggests that there are beneficial outcomes for the majority of people, there are many factors which contribute to success or failure.

### ***STEP 3 – talk to the therapist***

The most important factor in the success of any psychological therapy is the relationship between you and the therapist. Many therapists offer free-of-charge initial sessions – take advantage of these. Meet the therapist. Do you feel comfortable with them? Do they listen to you? Do they ask questions to clarify their understanding? Do you feel that they are interested in you, that they want to help you and that they are not judging you? Do they answer your queries and questions in a way that you are able to understand – without jargon? Over time, do you feel that you will be able to trust this person – to share with them what you have probably never shared with anyone else?

### ***STEP 4 – confidentiality and contracts***

Choosing someone who you are able to share all your history, thoughts and feelings with, is a very personal and important decision. There are always limits to confidentiality. It is important that you clarify this at the outset. On the whole, what you discuss in therapy is confidential. However,

registered and accredited practitioners are required to have regular supervision; you can expect details of your sessions to be discussed, though your identity may be protected. Your therapist should also discuss with you when they are legally required to break confidentiality and how they will manage situations where there are safety concerns. There may be additional occasions where your therapist may discuss your therapy – such as teaching, research or at your explicit request. Whatever the limits of confidentiality, you should be clear about these before you agree to therapy.

Most therapists will agree the details and terms of your therapy at the outset. You should be clear on the cost and duration of therapy, how often you will meet, whether your therapist is available outside of the agreed sessions, what procedures are in place if you have a complaint.

### ***STEP 5 – gut feelings and words of caution***

If you have followed steps 1-4, you have taken all the practical steps to ensure that you have found an appropriate psychologist or therapist. You will have met a registered psychologist or accredited therapist who has some specialist knowledge in working with relationship issues and has an understanding of complex and conflicted relationship dynamics. You will feel comfortable with them and will have a good understanding of the practical aspects of any proposed therapy. The final decision is often very much a “gut” feeling – trust your gut feeling; it will be right the majority of the time.

#### ***A few words of caution:***

**Recommendations are important.** BUT, make sure that recommendations do not over-ride all the other steps in the decision making process. Remember, therapist choice is a very personal one – as are the circumstances which bring you to therapy. No-one has your unique circumstances or experiences. The right therapist for someone else may not be the right therapist for you.

**Web-sites – good and bad.** It can be very difficult to choose a therapist from their web-site. A good web-site is very cheap and easy to achieve. Anyone can have a site which suggests expertise, professionalism and success, even those with no formal qualifications or accreditation. Similarly, for some practitioners, a web presence is not seen as important. It is very difficult to decide whether a psychologist or counsellor is the right one for you based on their web-site. Look out for details of accreditation and check these out.

**Testimonials can be a powerful influence.** Many web-sites have testimonials from satisfied clients. This often provides us with some reassurance that the therapist is both genuine and effective. However, remember, no-one is likely to publicise negative comments or feedback.

***This 5 STEP guide*** has been prepared by Dr Sue Whitcombe, HCPC registered counselling psychologist and chartered psychologist. If you have any comments or queries about this guide, you can contact Dr Sue Whitcombe [here](#).

You can find out more about the psychological therapy offered by ***Family Psychology Solutions*** [here](#).