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## **SCREENING AND SELECTING A THERAPIST**

Not everyone needs psychotherapy following trauma, but it can often be helpful. Your decision to seek therapy or counseling does not mean you're crazy or sick. Rather, you acknowledge that you may need some outside assistance to help you sort through your feelings of confusion, frustration, anxiety, sadness, and rage - all common emotions felt after a traumatic event. Speaking to an independent observer may help you regain a sense of perspective and balance that your family and friends can't provide. It's important to remember that therapy is **NOT** advice. The therapist will not have all the answers you are seeking, nor is (s)he a problem-solver. The therapist will help you discover new ways to look at your situation and restore the control that was taken from you by the criminal. (S)he will offer observations and insights about how your thoughts and feelings connect to each other as well as to your past and present experiences. Issues of safety, trust, control, esteem, and intimacy will arise during the course of your recovery process. As you explore these very personal topics, the therapeutic process can often become an emotionally intimate experience in which you can feel affirmed, accepted, and well understood for being yourself. **But BEWARE, physical intimacy is off-limits.** It is unethical for your therapist to become physically intimate with you!

Once you've come up with the names of at least four or five good prospects – ones whose specialties seem to fit your needs – call and interview each of them by phone. If you are considering a program, you will need to interview a program representative or staff member. Before going into the therapist's or program staff's qualifications, ask about fees, if there are any openings, and whether the available time slots are workable for you. Eliminate therapists and programs that are geographically inaccessible and those whose fees are prohibitive. When discussing fees, remember to ask about the possibility of a sliding scale, how payments are to be made, and what happens if you miss an appointment.

If the therapist or program meets your needs for these criteria, then inquire about training, experience, and/or focus. Also, since coursework on trauma and resulting psychological problems is not required training for licensed social workers, psychologists, and psychiatrists, it is critical that you inquire about the background of any potential therapist or the staff in any therapeutic program. You can also ask how the therapist keeps up with the latest developments in the field of trauma today, and whether he or she has colleagues available for consultation who are experts in Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), but don't avoid asking the hard questions for fear of offending either. "A good therapist doesn't wait for you (client) to take the initiative but jumps in to provide leadership and invite feedback," says Margaret Heldring, Ph.D., psychologist and clinical assistant professor at the University of Washington in Seattle. "(S)he creates an environment in which you feel safe bringing up unpleasant and uncomfortable feelings – especially those pertaining to her/him as your therapist. Your growing ability to speak up is a sign of progress, of growing competency, and should be acknowledged as such".

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Consider asking such questions as the following (if you are considering a program, you would ask these questions in terms of the program's staff):

How long have you been in practice?

Are you a member of any professional organizations?

How many crime-related trauma survivors (i.e. domestic violence/ sexual assault/ child abuse/ survivors of homicide victims, etc.) have you seen in therapy?

What is your background in crime-related trauma?

What, in your view, constitutes the recovery process for crime victims?

What experience have you had in treating people suffering from depression, PTSD, eating disorders, drug addictions, suicide ideation? (Gear your questions towards your particular problems).

How much and what kind of training have you had in these areas?

What kind of approaches would you take toward recovery from depression (PTSD, drug addictions, suicide ideation, etc.)? In the case of clinical depression, do you have psychiatrist whom you consult on issues of medication?

What would you do if I became suicidal?

Under what conditions are you obligated to notify authorities of my condition?

What is your view on self-help groups or other group therapy?

(If you want family counseling) Do you also conduct family therapy? If you don't, do you work with a family counselor?

What is the format for communicating with your clients? Under what circumstances would you contact your clients by mail, phone, e-mail, or virtual meetings?

Do you have same day, evening, weekend appointments available? What are your office hours? What is your cancellation policy?

What limits do you impose on contact with clients? Do you accept phone calls outside of regular scheduled sessions? Would you accept these calls at your office only, at home or by on-call service? Is there a charge for time spent on phone calls?

What insurance do you accept for your services? What are your fees for your out-of-network services? Do I have to submit my claim directly to my insurance carrier for re-imbursalment or will you assist me in filing the claim as a courtesy?

Therapy can be difficult work for you but can help you to feel better about yourself and your traumatic experience. If you feel uncomfortable or you don't "click" with your therapist, you can change your therapist at any time. The therapeutic process is about you and your needs as you have defined them. Its ultimate goal is to help you rebuild your coping mechanisms in the short term and rethink the post-trauma meaning of your needs and experiences in the long term.

(Taken From: Life After Trauma – A workbook for Healing by Dena Rosenbloom, PhD. and Mary Beth Williams, PhD.)

