HOW TO SELECT A THERAPIST:
LOYOLA EXPERT OFFERS SUGGESTIONS

When and why should a person seek therapy, and who should the therapist be?

"When an individual undergoes any stress-inducing, major change, he or she may need some support," said Loyola University Professor of Counseling and Educational Psychology Manuel Silverman, Ph.D. Silverman lists death of a spouse, separation from a spouse, loss of a job and moving as a few such stress-inducing situations.

"An individual faced with one such situation, needs to be aware of changes in his or her own behavior," Silverman continued. "They may want to avoid work, responsibility or change; there may be a difference in how they face routine activities. Basically, there is a sense of things being not quite right."

When this is the case, Silverman suggests that the troubled individual seek support through psychotherapy. However, selecting a therapist may seem as overwhelming as the personal problems at hand. Silverman offers some suggestions for making the process easier.

"I believe the phone book is the last place to look for a therapist," he stated. "Everyone listed is a licensed professional, but no further qualifications or knowledge is available."

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Instead, Silverman suggests seeing the family physician first. This doctor will know an individual's medical history, be able to treat any physical symptoms of stress, and can then make a referral to a competent therapist.

Family and friends who have gone through helpful therapy sessions also can provide reliable references, as can professional groups such as the Illinois Psychological Association.

If an individual nonetheless decides to use the phone book to find a therapist, Silverman suggests calling a half-dozen names.

"It is better to see four or five therapists once, than it is to see one therapist four or five times," he said. Initial visits usually consist of an interview and a medical history intake. Seeing a variety of therapists will show the varying degrees of connectedness between individuals, and will keep the person seeking therapy from continuing a "one is as good as another" pattern in life. "Most troubled individuals are having difficulty with planning and choices," Silverman elaborated. "If they do their homework and then pick a therapist, they've made a commitment."

When investigating potential therapists, Silverman says individuals should check for good listening and understanding skills; an empathetic awareness of the individual's problems;

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training and experience; and an obvious "role model" degree of control over his or her own life. Those seeking therapy should feel free to ask what an average length of treatment would be, be willing to trust their own judgement, and not be afraid to seek another therapist if the chemistry does not feel right.

"You're buying a service, so find out as much information as possible," Silverman said. "Initial 'vibes' can tell a lot; the chemistry isn't there for everyone. The hallmark of a good therapeutic relationship is trust."

Silverman admitted the process of selecting a therapist can be a paradoxical situation for a troubled person. "Going through a thorough decision-making process can be difficult for an anxious or depressed person," Silverman said. "But if they can sit down and concentrate, formulate questions, and match their needs with an appropriate therapist, they would need to see that therapist for a relatively shorter time. They would have already provided a lot of self-help."

Silverman received his undergraduate and masters degrees from Indiana University. He received his doctorate from Northwestern University in 1969, and has taught at Loyola University of Chicago since 1968. He has worked privately as a therapist since 1970, and presently conducts a private practice in Wilmette and Libertyville.

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