

Excerpt From: In Session
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To lessen the negative consequences of the therapist's power advantage, clients need to do all they can to ensure that their therapists are competent and trustworthy. So much of therapy is unknown and unquantifiable that clients have a right to know everything that *can be known* of the parameters of the relationship they are entering. In psychiatrist and author Tom Gutheil's words, clients have a right to know what they are "signing up for." Too many people in therapy find themselves, like Alice, in a Wonderland in which the rules keep changing and they are never certain what might happen next.

This process of qualifying the therapist begins in the initial interview. Most therapists will explain the basic rules of therapy, the fees, hours, setting, and the patient's right to confidentiality. It is far less likely for a therapist to delve into his or her philosophy of treatment or to describe how she or he defines their role. These are questions the client should ask. The client has a right to know how the therapist conceptualizes the process: What will happen during sessions? How directive will the therapist be? What sort of material will the therapist want to discuss? A person entering therapy should ask the therapist how he or she came to this approach and the major influences on their thinking.

Perhaps most important, the client should ask how the therapist conceptualizes the relationship between the therapist and his or her clients. What are the appropriate limits of that relationship? To what extent will the therapist be supportive and nurturing, and to what extent does the therapist believe in keeping an emotional distance? The participants in my survey often found a therapist's emotional distance upsetting and tended to take it personally, particularly if they were unprepared. People entering therapy have a right to know if this is how their therapist is likely to behave and to choose whether or not . . . to enter into a relationship of such intimacy with someone who is relatively unresponsive.

While a client may not understand the finer points of the therapist's discussion of theory, the client will be able to discern if the therapist has thought carefully about the matter rather than jumped on the most recent bandwagon, is humble or arrogant, is making claims that sound too good to be true, and is able to acknowledge uncertainty. The best therapists are humble and forthright about their own uncertainties. . .

In the first session, a client should also ask how long the prospective therapist has been practicing, what education the therapist has received, the credentials and licenses held, and if the therapist is receiving ongoing supervision. A supervision relationship means that the therapist consults a colleague on a regular basis about challenging cases. Therapists in the early years of their career should receive supervision, but even more experienced therapists recognize the advantages of having access to a second perspective.

Asking the therapist what they would do in the case of an impasse in the therapy is one way of finding out how the therapist conceptualizes their power in relation to the client's. Does the therapist assume that every problem comes from the client? Does she or he acknowledge that

therapists also bring their own issues to their work? Is the therapist open to the idea of seeking consultation from another therapist or of the client and therapist together seeking such a consultation?

Clients should also ask if their therapists have completed their own therapy. Although this is no guarantee of competence, those therapists who have been in therapy themselves are more likely to be in tune with their own issues and less likely to confuse their issues with the client's. At the very least, they will know what it feels like to sit on the other side of the couch.

A prospective client should ask if the therapist has any plans to leave the area and if the therapist is able to commit to a particular span of time; a year does not seem unreasonable.

More controversial is the question of what personal information about the therapist the client has a right or need to know. Some therapists readily disclose their sexual orientation, marital and parenting status, and ethnic or religious background; others do not.

None of this information is necessarily critical to ensuring a satisfactory relationship; it is quite possible in some cases, as some therapists contend, that clients will be better off not knowing it. A question answered *is* a fantasy lost. However, people entering therapy are adults. They have a right to sacrifice certain fantasies in the interest of greater confidence. Only they can assess the personal risks and benefits of having or not having certain information about the therapist, and they may know better than the therapist what the personal consequences of not knowing might be. . .

Some psychoanalytically oriented therapists have a tendency to answer every question with a question: Why is it important for you to know? What are your fantasies about the possible answers? How will it affect our relationship? In the spirit of good faith, the client may choose to answer the therapist's counterquestions. However, it may be important at the initial session for the client, who has not truly agreed to engage in the therapeutic process with the therapist yet, to simply say, "I'm trying to gather enough screening information to ensure my chances of therapeutic success and to reduce my risk of being victimized. If you're uncomfortable answering any of these questions, please tell me why."

At the other extreme, a person should be wary of a therapist who is too eager to volunteer information, particularly about personal issues, childhood history, beliefs, and opinions that don't pertain directly to the work. A therapist too eager to confide in the client in the first session may also have difficulty keeping his needs and interests out of the client's way later on.

Early in the therapeutic relationship is the time to set basic goals; conflicts may arise later if client and therapist have not agreed (perhaps never even discussed) the goals of the therapy. If the client thinks he or she is paying for a coach to offer enthusiastic validation and support and the therapist thinks the client needs more insight and greater autonomy, conflicts are likely to arise. Client and therapist should agree as to what goals are possible and how long achieving them is likely to take.