

Part 3: Your first appointment!

5. You made an appointment! Things are happening. Here's what I'd like for you to pay attention to, along with some questions I'd like for you to ask yourself. You don't have to consciously think about all of these things in the moment, but be conscious of them.

- a. **The space:** When you get to the office, pay attention to how the space makes you feel.
 - i. Is there adequate parking? Is the parking lot (if applicable) well-lit for later appointments?
 - ii. If you didn't drive, is it close enough to a local transit stop?
 - iii. Are you comfortable? If not, what is making you uncomfortable?
 - iv. Do you feel welcome? If not, what is making you feel unwelcome?
 - v. Is this a place you will feel comfortable spending a lot of time and emotional energy? If not, what is making you feel constrained or stifled?

These questions apply to the waiting area, if there is one, but especially to the therapist's office where your sessions will take place. If the couch or chair is uncomfortable and the lighting is weird, you may not feel inclined to talk about emotional trauma or turmoil. That's okay. This may not be your therapist, or maybe it will be for a short while until you can find someone in a place you're more comfortable in.

b. The therapist:

- i. When you're greeted by the therapist, is there a handshake and a smile? If there's not and you don't mind that, take note.
- ii. Do you get a sense of warmth or approachability from this person?
- iii. Do they seem to want to speak to you?
- iv. Do they seem particularly tired or unavailable in some way?
- v. Do they seem nervous?
- vi. Do they have any sort of speech patterns or a tone of voice that you find distracting?
- vii. Do they make eye contact with you while you're speaking, at least most of the time? Does that eye contact bother you in some way?

It's important that you feel like this person is available and approachable, whether or not you prefer warmth or some sort of excited greeting. This person is here for you and you should feel that.

- a. Did this person make you feel important?
- b. Heard?
- c. Understood?
- d. Did they make eye contact with you while you were speaking? If that is not of particular importance to you, then note that.
- e. Did they ask about your specific goals for your sessions/therapy in general?
- f. Could they adequately and accurately reflect what you're saying/have said it back to you in a way that indicated you are understood?
- g. This will likely sound something like, "I think what I hear you saying is that..." or "One of the things I'm picking up on, and correct me if this doesn't feel right to you, is..."
- h. This one may be better suited to ask after a couple of sessions: Are they able to detect & trace threads of specific issues throughout your

sessions (ones that you've knowingly brought up or ones that your therapist has noticed in your time together)?

- i. For example, self-worth and self-esteem are two of mine that popped up within my first two sessions and my therapist made sure to bring it to my attention each time & ask me to explore their meaning with her.

- c. **The first session:** Your first session, often likened to an intake session, will likely include a lot of questions from the therapist, primarily about your background, medical history, any prior experience with therapy, etc. The therapist will either be taking notes on a laptop or legal pad, so expect them to ask a lot of questions, write a lot of answers, and be as detailed as possible.

d. The therapist should ask if you have ever had any suicidal ideations and attempts. If you have, tell them. This is one person you should be absolutely honest with for a number of reasons, not the least of which is this person is going to help you understand YOU. They are only able to do that if you give them all the information they ask for, and volunteer anything they didn't specifically ask. If you think it's important, tell them. Shame can't survive silence, so speak your truth.

e. Every wonderful therapist I have ever had has ended my first session with the following question:

- i. What are your goals for therapy? What do you hope to gain from our time together?

No lie. Every single one. The therapist should ask you this question at some point in this session, and it may have even been asked on one of the intake forms. Answer honestly. If you're not sure, say so. If you just want to talk to someone about how you feel, say that. Again, be honest. This is how you come to know and help yourself.

If you have time at the end of your initial session, ask your therapist any questions you may have. If you want to know why they became a therapist, ask. *Spoiler alert: I always ask this.* If you want to know a bit more about their experience and expertise, ask. If they become offended or defensive—**RED FLAG. This is not your therapist.**

f. At the end of this session, you may feel exhausted, and the therapist will, too; however, it is CRUCIAL to make a follow-up appointment if you feel like this could be your therapist, even if only for a short while.

- i. I have seen some therapists for years and some for only months or weeks depending on my immediate needs and material constraints. I've seen a therapist for only five sessions because he was out of network, I was only working part-time, and we didn't have a rapport or connection that I felt I could trust. Having been with my previous therapist for two years, I knew that this connection was essential for me. Because my Depression tells me I am and should be alone, and that I am worthless, I have to make sure that my therapist is someone who doesn't make me feel like a burden or obligation. I can't feel like just another patient or just another person because I know (after years of therapy) that I'm not; the way I experience the world is quite different than most people and I need my therapist to see that I am both formidable and fragile, unapologetically taking up space while on the verge of shrinking.

- ii. I share this with you because you may not feel connected to or completely compatible with every therapist. That's okay. If you feel that you're in a tough spot and just need someone to hear and bear witness to you, seeing someone is sometimes better than seeing no one. **If that someone makes you feel unimportant, insignificant, or uncomfortable, that's not a good therapist for anyone—not just you—ANYONE.** However, if the therapist is maybe not entirely on your wavelength, but provides a safe space, time, and metaphorical helping hand while you wade through this moment in your life, it may be worth seeing them for a short while just to get your bearings.

I don't have to tell you this, but I will: Life can be tough, y'all. It can be positively brutal for some of us whose hearts seem too big and whose brains seem too busy. If you have a choice between not seeing a therapist and trying to keep afloat on your own, or seeing a therapist who isn't your perfect match and trying to cope with your powers combined, I'll always advise you to see that therapist.

Therapy is not easy and your mind and body will need to recuperate afterward. You may find yourself talking about an event or a seemingly innocuous subject only to find tears quietly rolling down your cheeks. This is what self-exploration, care, and discovery can be like sometimes. After your first session, it is totally fine to drive home in silence and go to bed immediately, or watch *30 Rock* and eat Swedish fish in your underwear. Or both. Or neither. It's your body and brain, you do what you need to.

Once you've taken time to decompress from your session, maybe a day, maybe a few, you'll need to check in with yourself about your overall feelings about the therapist. I'm providing a list of questions for you to ask yourself (ones that I have asked myself many times, and continue to revisit) if you'd like some guidance, as I think that all therapists have these traits and can offer these experiences.