



# Developing Supportive Working Alliances with Mental Health Professionals

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In keeping with David Letterman's theme of a "Top Ten" list, here is my top-ten list of factors to consider in choosing a mental health practitioner.

## 10. How many mental health practitioners do you really know?

Do you have a referral list at your disposal? And, if you do, how did you acquire it? Was it given to you by your firm, or a colleague? Did you contact a professional organization, such as the APA (The American Psychological Association, FPA (Florida Psychological Association), or one of their affiliate FPA chapters (i.e., Dade, Broward, or Palm Beach country)? Even if you had one or more names, have you ever taken the time to meet this practitioner in person, whether at your office, at a Marital and Family Law or another Conference, or outside your office for a working breakfast or lunch? If you happened to answer "no", to any of these, ask yourself, why not? Sure, it is understandable if your reply was, there hasn't been an opportunity. Or, it was easier to defer to a respected colleague. Yet, I'd like to encourage you to trust your own judgment and rely on your own instincts and impressions.

## 9. What are characteristics you look for in a therapist?

**a. Years of Education (including theoretical orientation)** Perhaps theoretical orientation is not important to you. But, consider this: if the mhp cannot explain how he or she works with a patient, his or her treatment plan, techniques

and strategies, etc., you may wonder how he or she can help your client achieve a successful outcome or healthier resolution. One of the reasons to seek therapy could be to enable the client to understand the various factors that led to the marital dissolution (i.e., poor verbal and non-verbal communications; unrealistic expectations, repeating maladaptive patterns from childhood, self-defeating behaviors, etc.) so they are better prepared to handle their present and future.

**b. Years of clinical training and experience (i.e., including Professor at local university or college, private or group practice, or on hospital staff)** Sometimes it is beneficial to find out about the mhp's background and years of experience as it can enable you to make the best informed decision.

### c. Competency (Have you thoroughly reviewed the mhp's cv?)

Do you know the mhp's areas of specialization? These are all important to check out as you are likely to have a case that requires a mhp with a specific or particular area of specialization (i.e., child and/or adolescent therapist; expertise in developmental delays, divorce coach in collaborative family law cases, dual diagnosis, neuropsychology, competency evaluations, parenting coordinator, etc.)

Keep in mind, that the stressors associated with a divorce often can exacerbate an underlying or undiagnosed emotional disorder in your client. Or, depending on how contentious the dissolution, the possibility of new disorders can be great, due to the client's inability to adequately manage fearful, pessimistic, or angry and resentful thoughts and feelings.

**d. Recommendation from colleagues.** In what capacity has your colleague worked with the mhp? (i.e., child therapist, individual or family therapist, parent coordinator, divorce coach in Collaborative Family Law case, etc.)

**e. Publications, presentations, and website.** This would also give you insight into the mhp professional interests and capabilities.

... but....what what does your gut tell you?... so

## 8. What is your impression of the mhp?

Personality factors matter too. Here the mhp's demeanor, temperament, interpersonal and communicative style should be considered as you want someone you are comfortable working with.

No matter how many mhp's work in the family law sector, each of us bring our own confluence of variable such as (but by no means comprehensive) family history, genetics, birth order, childhood and environmental factors, intelligence, ethnicity, religion, SES, plus significant life events are consciously or unconsciously woven into the very fabric of our being and within our profession. Furthermore, the sum total of these factors impacts and influences our personality. Even our offices reveal something unique about each one of us. Yet it is inside the therapeutic space where the science and art of psychotherapy comes together. I mention that because I want you to be aware that each of us has our own unique way of blending our theoretical orientations, clinical skills, with own subjective experiences, such as using our intuition and empathy. Hence, certain mhp's are better suited handling particular

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patients than others\* (In case you didn't know, mental health practitioners prefer to use the word, "patient" rather than client.)

Certainly, in the legal profession, characteristics such as being articulate, assertive, and confident are important qualities to possess. Have you ever considered which mhp would be the right fit knowing your client's emotional and mental needs? It is something you need to consider, as therapy works best when there is a positive working relationship. In fact, gender should not matter as much as the mhp's clinical skill sets.

**7. Does the mhp have Courtroom experience – Yes or No?**

Do you know if the mental health practitioner has ever had Courtroom experience? Would the mhp be voluntarily willing to appear in Court? And, if so, have you determined the mhp's role? Fact Witness? Expert Testimony? Court appointed therapist or evaluator? These are important questions to ascertain, since not all licensed professionals are willing to work in this capacity.

**6. Office Location, or... as in the real estate business, it's all about the location.**


Where is the mhp's office located? For some clients, this can be the de-

terminating factor due to all the demands and pressures in his or her life. However, do not let geography sway you from at least making a referral to the professional whose opinion and interpersonal style you respect and value the most.

**5. How are your therapeutic skills? How well do you think you are playing amateur shrink?**

The real purpose of this question is to ask, when do you broach the topic about referring your client to a mhp? What do you use as the basis for your asking? Is it based on seeing a spectrum of varying emotions over the course of several meetings in your office? Or, is it typically posed in your initial interview? Do you even inquire to find out if your client has ever previously met with a mhp? Many individuals have never spoken to a trained professional, despite years of living with marital and emotional turmoil and/or personal dissatisfaction. Oftentimes, clients find various ways to deny, dismiss, and/or anesthetize themselves (i.e., overeating, excessive alcohol, prescription or illicit drug usage, gambling, extramarital affairs, etc.) to their own mental and emotional pain.

Do you think your client is receptive and willing to learn how to communicate more effectively? Even if your client appears mostly reasonable in your office, what happens when stressful, unpleasant, and upsetting feelings are triggered due outside your office due to divorce related issues? If you really want to promote what is in the best interest of your client (and this would also indirectly include his or her children), wouldn't it benefit your client to learn how to express him or herself appropriately and without the sarcasm, belittling tone, hostility, guilt-inducing statements, mixed message or vindictiveness? Chances are, the majority of your clients are hoping in the future to eventually meet someone new. So, the idea of establishing healthier and respectful communication skills would only be an asset. Chances are, you've had a client who needed help controlling his or her tongue as it was shown to



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be detrimental to the child/ren's emotional and mental well-being. Learning diplomacy even under adverse conditions is a skill that takes time to acquire. Sadly, the client who needs to learn this skill the most, usually is one most determined not to seek help.

Which brings up an interesting point...

### How do you handle negative and/or difficult client behaviors?

How do you handle a client who is resistant, fearful, or unwilling to see a therapist. What is your game plan? Do you just shrug your shoulders and say, "Ok"? If you take this passive and nonchalant approach, then you are doing your client and yourself a disservice.

Try starting by inquiring why? Yes, you may hear a number of hypotheses that make sense: the client is worried about something; whether it is the unknown, the expense of attending therapy, and/or possibly not wanting to experience shame, guilt, or a general malaise accompanying bad feelings. But, it's really not just about the reality; it has much more to do with what is going on inside their head and heart. And while every client's issue is unique, all clients are undergoing a significant change in their lives. Sure, change is hard. Some individuals may thrive on change, but most find it challenging. In hindsight, a client may acknowledge the change was painful but necessary and even led to further growth and maturity. Many clients are adept at denying their reality and so they function by busying themselves at work or taking on added responsibilities so there isn't time to reflect on their lives. These behaviors do not negate the problem. Be aware, your client's response may be a potential red flag for you. Your client could start to resist your requests, as any change may be hard to embrace.

### 4. Let's discuss Boundaries.

As a family law attorney, I am sure you are a very good listener. But, gathering facts and information does not mean

you should also try and function as your client's therapist. Yet, how often does your client try to place you in that role? Many clients unknowingly blur the boundaries between the two and expect you to be able to soothe their emotional distress as well as work out the best financial and time sharing arrangement for them. Setting appropriate boundaries is essential. Otherwise, you may find yourself becoming increasingly burdened by your client's personal requests. Therapy offers your client the opportunity to have a safe place to express all kinds of feelings, as the mhp's role is to listen empathically and non-judgmentally, reduce automatic assumptions, and help resolve long standing internal as well as interpersonal conflicts.

### 3. Where's the money... or Who's paying the bill?

Do you know the mhp fee for service? There can be a significant discrepancy between an mhp who is in network (i.e., hmo's some ppo's), out of network (i.e., some ppo's and eop's), or who has left all managed care insurance panels to establish his or her own fees. Given today's economic climate this will be problematic for some clients. While it is true, a client could potentially save money seeing a mhp

who is on their insurance plan and where a small co-payment is required for each visit. Yet, if that mhp has less experience or training in divorce related matters may not be a savings for them in the end. It may be best to recommend your client scheduling a consultation with at least two therapists, so he or she can determine which practitioner is the best fit for your client's particular needs.

### 2. Sex! - Ah, yes, ... got your attention!

However, I am going expanding that term to its broadest sense in order to discuss the general idea of personal well-being. And, that of course, encompasses feeling good... Most likely, if you do a good job in helping your client, you could be rewarded at some point in time by having your client refer a new client to you. We all know word of mouth is the best form of advertising!

You could tell your client that studies show that therapy can improve one's quality of life if the individual is able to be accepting of oneself with greater tolerance and forgiveness. The willingness to be opened minded is actually a strength, not a weakness. Most adults going through a

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divorce at some point find themselves struggling with a range of emotions going back and forth from sadness to anger, to anxiety and powerlessness or helplessness. Others may refuse to allow themselves to succumb to negative emotions, yet cling to behaviors they know out of fear and uncertainty. Until your client can appreciate the benefits of talking out problems firsthand, it is hard to put into words the transformative experience of talk therapy.

Most importantly, your client could experience a new way of understanding him or herself in a way that may not have been possible before. This occurs through the discourse of working out one's inner or emotional wounds. Severing a marriage does not end the inner or outer turmoil in an individual's life; no matter their daily profession. In fact, undergoing a divorce can create more stress as there are so many added variables to

contend with. But, over time, it can be a cleansing process, as it is possible to also eliminate and change what wasn't working, and what led to the client's unhappiness, discomfort, and personal or relational dissatisfaction.

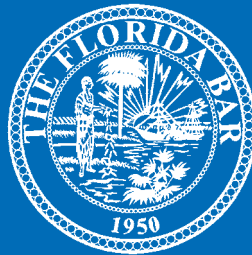
### 1. Greater peace of mind for you (doesn't that sound good? – and it creates a good ending!)

In conclusion, having solid working relations with mhp's can enable your clients to feel more secure and trusting in their decision to have hired you, potentially there could be less risk of losing your client, and possibly a greater ability to resolve cases with less animosity and acrimony. It also helps you as you gain a network of mhp's to consult with, work in partnership together, and learn new skills to use in future cases.

*Andrea Corn, Psy.D., has been in private practice for over sixteen years and is currently located in Lighthouse Point, FL, where she provides therapy*

*for children, adolescents, and families. She received her Psy.D., from Nova Southeastern University, after completing an internship at Miami Children's Hospital. Dr. Corn obtained a post-doctoral degree in Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy from the Southeast Florida Institute for Psychoanalytic Psychology (SEFIPP). Dr. Corn has been an adjunct faculty member at Nova Southeastern University and St. Thomas University. Dr. Corn is a member of the American Psychological Association (APA), Florida Psychological Association, (FPA), Florida Psychoanalytic Society, Association for Applied Sports Psychology (AASP), affiliate member of the American Psychoanalytic Association (ApsaA), and is also listed in the National Register of Health Service providers in Psychology. Dr. Corn has served on the Florida Advisory Board for Safe Haven for Newborns since its inception. Over the years, Dr. Corn has written articles for South Florida Parenting, The Miami Herald, The National Alliance of Youth Sports (NAYS) as she also provides sports psychology consulting.*

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