

A FREE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCE

The Therapist Vetting Checklist

10 Questions to Ask Before Your First Session

A practical, no-pressure guide to understanding credentials, asking the right questions, and choosing a therapist who is genuinely the right fit for you.

A free resource from ZipHealthy

How to Read a Therapist's Credentials

Those letters after a therapist's name aren't just decoration — they tell you how much training the person has, what they're legally licensed to do, and what kind of care you can expect. Here's a plain-language guide to the most common credentials you'll see.

LCSW — *Licensed Clinical Social Worker*

A master's-level clinician licensed to diagnose and treat mental health conditions through psychotherapy. LCSWs are trained to look at the whole picture — you, your relationships, and the systems around you (family, work, community) — and often bring a practical, goals-oriented approach to sessions.

LPC / LMHC — *Licensed Professional Counselor / Licensed Mental Health Counselor*

A master's-level clinician licensed to diagnose and provide psychotherapy, similar in scope to an LCSW. Training programs vary, so it's worth asking what modalities or specialties a given LPC/LMHC focuses on.

PhD / PsyD — *Licensed Psychologist*

A doctoral-level clinician who can provide psychotherapy and, depending on training, conduct formal diagnostic evaluations that go beyond what a session alone can capture. Psychologists often have additional research or specialty training.

MD / DO — *Psychiatrist*

A medical doctor who can diagnose mental health conditions and prescribe medication. Many psychiatrists focus primarily on medication management rather than ongoing talk therapy, though some do both.

Good to know: A license type tells you what someone is trained and legally authorized to do — it doesn't by itself tell you whether their style is a good fit for you. That's what the next section is for.

10 Questions to Ask (Questions 1–5)

1 How do you decide if we're a good fit for each other?

The relationship between you and your therapist is one of the strongest predictors of whether therapy feels helpful — a thoughtful answer here tells you they take fit seriously.

2 What treatment approach or framework do you use, and why?

Approaches like CBT, DBT, or family-systems work differently. You don't need to know the jargon — you just want a clear, plain-language explanation of how they actually work with clients.

3 What is your experience working with concerns like mine?

Experience with your specific situation — anxiety, a relationship issue, a life transition — matters more than years in practice alone.

4 Can you share your license type and number so I can verify it?

A licensed therapist should never hesitate to share this. It's public information, and verifying it takes five minutes (see page 6).

5 What are your fees, and do you accept my insurance or offer a sliding scale?

Get this in writing or in an email before your first session so there are no surprises on your bill.

10 Questions to Ask (Questions 6–10)

6 What is your cancellation and no-show policy?

Policies vary widely — knowing this upfront avoids an unpleasant surprise the first time life gets in the way of a session.

7 Do you offer telehealth, in-person sessions, or both?

Think honestly about which format you'll actually show up for consistently — the best therapist in the world doesn't help if the format doesn't fit your life.

8 How do you typically build a treatment plan?

A therapist who can describe how goals get set — and revisited — is signaling a structured, collaborative process rather than open-ended chatting.

9 How will we know if this is working? How is progress measured?

Look for a real answer — check-ins on specific goals, changes you'd notice in daily life — rather than a vague "we'll just see."

10 What happens if we try this and it isn't working?

A confident therapist will talk openly about adjusting the approach or referring you elsewhere — that flexibility is a sign of good clinical judgment, not failure.

Red Flags vs. Green Flags

Your gut reaction during a consultation call or first session is real data. Here's what to watch for on both ends.

Red Flags	Green Flags
Won't share license type or number, or gets defensive when asked.	Shares credentials openly and encourages you to verify them.
Guarantees a specific outcome or timeline ("I'll have you feeling better in 4 sessions").	Talks about realistic, collaborative goals without making promises.
Fees, cancellation policy, or insurance details are vague or change after you ask.	Fees and policies are clear, consistent, and put in writing.
Dismisses your questions as unnecessary or a sign of distrust.	Welcomes questions and treats them as a normal part of getting started.
Talks more about themselves than about understanding your situation.	Asks thoughtful questions and listens more than they talk in the first conversation.
No plan for check-ins on progress or for what happens if things aren't working.	Describes how you'll both know if therapy is helping — and what happens if it isn't.
Pressures you to commit to a long-term package before a single session.	Comfortable starting with one session at a time while you decide on fit.

How to Verify a License

Every state keeps a public, searchable database of licensed mental health providers. You only need the therapist's full name (and license type, if you have it). Here's where to look in four states:

Arkansas

Search "Arkansas Board of Examiners in Counseling" for LPCs, or the "Arkansas Social Work Licensing Board" for LCSWs. Each board site has a "Verify a License" or "Licensee Search" tool — enter the provider's name and confirm the status reads **Active**.

Arizona

Search "Arizona Board of Behavioral Health Examiners" for LCSWs and LPCs, or the "Arizona Board of Psychologist Examiners" for psychologists. Both offer an online license-lookup tool by name.

Virginia

Search "Virginia Department of Health Professions License Lookup." This single portal covers social work, counseling, and psychology boards — search by name to see license status and any disciplinary history.

Florida

Search "Florida Department of Health MQA License Verification." This statewide tool covers all licensed health professions, including mental health providers — search by name or license number.

What to check: the license status is *active* (not expired, suspended, or surrendered), the license type matches what the provider told you, and there are no unresolved disciplinary actions listed.

First-Session Preparation Worksheet

A little preparation helps you use your first session well. Jot down a few thoughts before you go.

What I want to bring up first:

Patterns or changes I've noticed lately (check any that apply):

- ☐ Sleep or energy has changed
- ☐ Mood has felt different than usual
- ☐ A relationship feels strained
- ☐ Worry or stress feels hard to switch off
- ☐ A life change or transition is weighing on me
- ☐ Other: _____

What I hope is different in a few months:

Questions I still want answered:

Logistics to confirm before day one:

- ☐ Fee and insurance/sliding-scale confirmed
- ☐ Cancellation policy confirmed
- ☐ Telehealth link or office address confirmed
- ☐ License verified (see page 6)

Educational Use Only

This worksheet is a free educational resource intended to help you compare and evaluate therapists. It is for general informational purposes only, does not constitute therapy, medical advice, or legal advice, and does not create a clinician-client relationship between you and ZipHealthy PLLC or any individual clinician. If you are working with a provider on a specific concern, follow their individualized guidance over any general information here.

If you are in crisis

call or text **988** · text **HOME** to **741741** · call **911**

Looking for Support?

If you'd like professional support: www.ziphealthy.com · (479) 259-1390

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