

# No-bullshit guide to finding a therapist for men

A short, practical guide for sceptical men.

## 1. Why you're right to be sceptical

Over the past fifteen years or so, UK and US training programmes have absorbed a fairly consistent worldview, and the language around diversity, inclusion and social justice has worked its way into the curriculum and the supervisor's office. For a lot of therapists, a particular political framework now functions as clinical common sense. Often without them really noticing.

This matters because of what therapy is: a fairly one-sided arrangement in which you end up telling a stranger things you haven't told anyone else. If that stranger walks in with strong assumptions about men, masculinity, ambition, hierarchy or traditional values, and hasn't pulled those assumptions apart himself, you're going to feel it, usually before you can put words to it. It shows up as a faint tension in the room which might mean you will edit/censor what you want to say.

So the worry about being quietly processed, nudged, with no obvious pressure, toward a particular view of yourself, your relationships or your sex, is reasonable. It has a basis.

It isn't all of therapy, though. Plenty of therapists, including some on the political left, take the craft seriously enough to leave their politics at the door. The job is to find one of them.

## 2. What therapy actually is, and what it isn't

The standard objection is that therapy is just talking, and if you want to talk you can call a friend. Fair, up to a point. But the two aren't doing the same work, and the difference is substantial.

Jonathan Shedler, an American psychologist, has spent years picking a fight with his own profession about this. His read of the evidence (inconvenient for an industry built around short, manualised treatments) is that the therapies producing durable change don't tend to work by teaching techniques or by rewording your thoughts. They work by setting up a particular kind of relationship, inside which you can finally look at what you've been avoiding, let yourself feel what you've been holding off, and come out of it somewhat different from the man who walked in.

Venting doesn't do that. Venting lets off pressure and leaves everything where it was. Advice doesn't really do it either; advice is somebody else's answer clipped onto your situation, and it usually fits badly. And to be honest, therapy wouldn't exist if people could listen/take their friends (or even their own) advice. Therapy shouldn't be a slow correction either, where your therapist's preferred view ends up being the one you've apparently arrived at on your own.

What it is, in older language, is a descent. Every serious myth has the hero going down somewhere, cave, underworld, belly of a whale, because that's how change tends to work. You go toward the thing you've been walking around. Aragorn doesn't get to be king until he's walked the Paths of the Dead. A decent therapist walks down there with you. He doesn't pretend the cave isn't there and he doesn't try to talk you into a better mood about it.

This is one reason a lot of men end up in therapy even after swearing they never would. Chuck Palahniuk of Fight Club gets at it. There's a part of a man that wants to test his edge and come out of the test changed, and when nothing in his life makes room for that, it does something with itself anyway. It takes the back door, or in this case, Project Mayhem.

## 3. The masculinity problem in therapy

Here's the concern, plainly. A lot of mainstream therapy, not all of it, but more of it than is comfortable, treats traits more common in men as something to be softened. Stoicism, emotional restraint, competitiveness, a taste for

hierarchy, the habit of solving before feeling, a preference for action over rumination. From the assumption that “traditional masculinity is harmful”, these can get handled as character faults. Most of the time they’re adaptations that have earned their place. Like anything useful, they can tip into excess, but that’s a different conversation.

This is where Jordan Peterson’s clinical work, leaving the politics aside, is worth knowing about. As a lecturer and as a clinician, Peterson spent decades talking to men about the things the profession often turns awkwardly around: responsibility, meaning, the burden of competence, the pull between order and chaos, the archetypes sitting underneath how men experience of life. Whatever you make of him on other fronts, the clinical point holds up. Most men in a consulting room need to be addressed as grown-ups with decisions to make, rather than handled as cases to be settled.

Masculinity also isn’t one thing. The Lord of the Rings is useful here because it gives you several versions of it at once. Aragorn is the reluctant king - power held back, used with restraint, earned through service. Frodo carries a burden he didn’t choose and wasn’t obviously built for, and he carries it anyway. Sam is loyal, ordinary in the best sense, the friend who walks into Mordor with you because he isn’t going to let you go alone. None of these men is a problem to be solved. A therapist worth his fee is someone who can see which of them you’re reaching for, where you’re falling short of it, and help you get closer to the version of yourself you were actually trying to be.

A good therapist isn’t in the business of making a man smaller. He helps him become more of the man he already was.

## 4. What to look for in a therapist

The signs of a good one are fairly specific.

**He works with your values.** If responsibility, discipline, duty or faith matter to you, he takes them as material to build on. You shouldn’t find yourself defending your worldview in the first session.

**He doesn’t moralise.** Describe a conflict, a temptation, or something you’re not proud of, and what comes back is interest, not a sermon. You’re not being graded.

**His interest is in what you want to work on.** Therapy with an agenda will try to rearrange who you are. Therapy that works starts with whatever you brought in and follows it where it actually goes, even if that turns out not to be where either of you expected.

**He can take directness.** Push back on something he’s said and he doesn’t get stiff or retreat into process language (“I notice you seem activated”). He engages.

**He respects your autonomy.** He isn’t trying to steer you toward a conclusion of his own choosing.

**He keeps his politics out of the room.** This is the big one. Volunteering political or ideological views in a session is a professional lapse, even when it’s dressed up as honesty. What you’re paying for is his attention, not his opinions.

## 5. Questions to ask, and what the answers tell you

Most therapists offer a short consultation call before you commit. Use it, pick a few of these and work them in. Listen at least as much for how easily the answer comes as for what’s in it.

### 1. How do you tend to work with men who prefer direct, practical conversation?

Why it matters: It tells you whether he can work with directness or whether he treats it as something to get underneath.

**Good answer:** He can describe how he meets it without making it a symptom. Mentions meeting people where they actually are.

**Red flag:** He jumps straight to “men often use directness to avoid feeling”. He’s already interpreting you.

## 2. Do you work from a particular framework or school?

Why it matters: You want a man who can name what he does and why. Not one running a worldview in therapist clothing.

**Good answer:** A clear, jargon-light description of how he thinks about change. Psychodynamic, existential, integrative, and similar answers are generally solid.

**Red flag:** The answer leans heavily on identity categories or a political lens.

## 3. How do you think about masculinity in your work?

Why it matters: Better to ask now than find out five sessions in.

**Good answer:** He treats masculinity as varied, complicated, and worth engaging with seriously. He can describe men he's helped without any hint of disdain.

**Red flag:** "Traditional masculinity" appears in scare quotes. Or he says masculinity isn't really something he thinks about — which usually means he has strong, unexamined views.

## 4. When a client disagrees with you, how do you handle it?

Why it matters: You're checking whether he can stay in the room when things get frictional, or whether he retreats into technique or goes quietly cold.

**Good answer:** He welcomes it. He may say that disagreement is often where the useful work starts. **Red flag:** Defensive. Or worse, he reframes disagreement as resistance.

## 5. What do you think therapy is actually for?

Why it matters: His theory of the work tells you what you're signing up for.

**Good answer:** Some version of helping you see yourself more clearly, face what you've been sidestepping, and live a bit more honestly. This should be concrete, not therapy-speak slogans.

**Red flag:** "Holding space." "Healing journey." "Unlearning." The language of the industry standing in for a thought.

## 6. How will I know if this is working?

Why it matters: Therapy that never shows up in your actual life is an expensive standing order. Shedler's point is that real change turns up outside the consulting room.

**Good answer:** He expects you to notice shifts in how you handle situations, in what bothers you, in how you relate to the people who matter. He's comfortable being held to that.

**Red flag:** He treats the question as slightly gauche, as if measuring outcomes is beneath the work.

## 7. What happens if I don't want to go where you think the work is pointing?

Why it matters: Tells you whether he sees himself as a companion on the trip or the man at the wheel. **Good answer:** He respects the call and works with it. He might tell you what he thinks, but he doesn't push.

**Red flag:** Any version of "well, that might itself be something to look at".

## 8. Is there anything you won't work with, or anyone you don't work well with?

Why it matters: An honest answer tells you he knows his limits. It also flushes out the therapist who thinks he can be all things to all men.

**Good answer:** A clear, human answer. He knows his strengths and his edges.

**Red flag:** He says he works well with everyone. He doesn't.

## **6. A closing note**

That's it. If you've read this far you've already done more homework on finding a therapist than most men ever do, which is the right instinct. Take your time. Trust what you pick up on the consultation call. If the man across from you clearly doesn't get the kind of man he's talking to, he isn't your therapist, there are better ones out there, and the effort of finding one pays off for years.

If you want to see how I work, the consultation is free and you can ask me any of these questions ([www.jamessyates.com](http://www.jamessyates.com)).