



Tips for  
**Finding a Therapist**  
That is a  
**Good Fit**  
for  
**You**

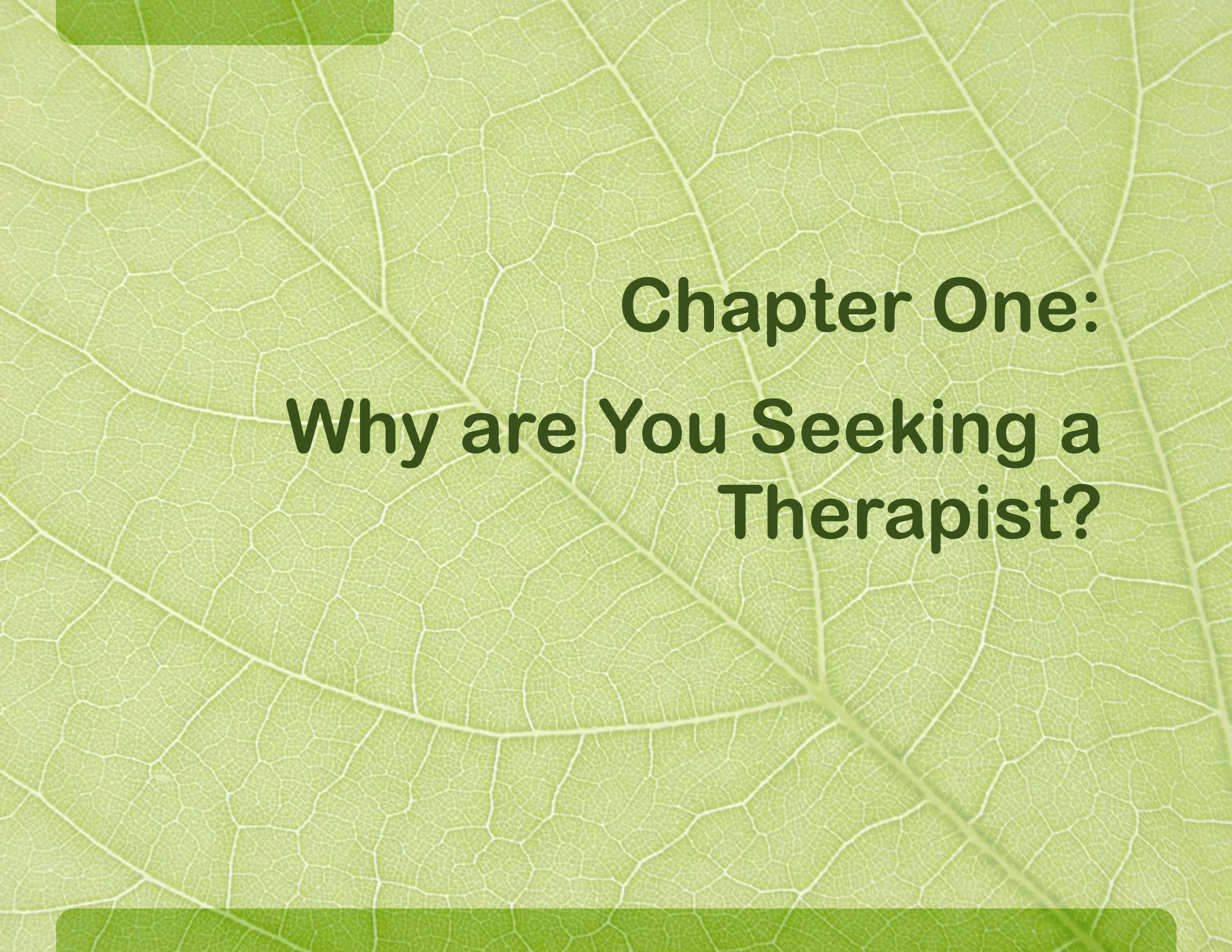
Written by Diann M. Ackard, PhD  
For the National Register of Health Service Providers in Psychology

**So,** you have something that you want to talk about... Or maybe a few things... Or maybe you just need someone to talk to as you think about your life...

A therapist can be a valuable resource for you, but sometimes finding a good fit is a challenge. Therapy is a significant commitment – of time, financial resources and emotional energy. Yet therapy has many benefits, including feeling understood, being helped to achieve a better life, finding a fresh perspective for a current dilemma or problem, developing better skills and overcoming problems.

For these reasons and many more, finding a good fit in a therapist is important.

This eBook guides you through many of the questions you'll want to answer when searching for a mental health professional.



# **Chapter One: Why are You Seeking a Therapist?**

The first step in finding a therapist that is a good fit for you is to identify what you want to work on. Are you feeling sad or anxious? Is there a relationship in your life, such as a partner or coworker or parent that is challenging? Do you engage in some behaviors (like drinking too much alcohol, making lists, lying, overeating) that are interfering with your health or quality of life?

It will be helpful to know in detail the areas of your life that you want to work on. Just as you would describe to your automobile mechanic the symptoms (noises, lights, how it runs, etc.) when your car breaks down, you will need to know what areas you want to work on in order to find the right therapist for your needs.

The next few pages list some of the most common problems people want help with in therapy. Go through this list and make note of the topics you might want to address. If it helps, you can also print out page 5 and 6 and circle each topic. Add any topics that are not covered in this list in the “other” category. The list on page 6 are those problems that usually arise in infancy, childhood or adolescence and may also be a focus of treatment. Although these lists cannot capture every single problem, they can help you describe your challenges to a potential therapist.

# Chapter One

## Changes in functioning, memory, and awareness

Loss of consciousness or awareness of what's happening around you

Forgetting, being disoriented, not being able to focus

Difficulty learning new information or recalling information from the past

Trouble speaking or moving

Failure to recognize or identify objects

Difficulties with planning, organizing, sequencing, abstracting

## Circumstances and life events

Stressful life events (e.g., divorce, loss of a loved one, unemployment)

Difficult situations (e.g., unhappy marriages, getting low grades in school, deployment of a loved one, illnesses, conflict in relationships)

Traumatic occurrences

Significant pain, physical complaints

Problems with sexual functioning

## Behaviors that interfere with functioning and quality of life

Alcohol or drug consumption, gambling

Recklessness such as with driving, spending, sexual relations, breaking laws

Lying, deceiving others

Sleeping too little or too much, difficulty falling or staying asleep, staying awake

Significant weight loss or gain; changes in appetite

Engaging in overeating and/or extreme behaviors to maintain or lose weight

Fatigue, loss of energy

Problems thinking or concentrating, distractibility, indecisiveness

Fidgeting and being keyed up, or having really slow movements

Wanting or trying to end the life of yourself or someone else

Talking rapidly, having thoughts that race

Recurrent and persistent thoughts, impulses, or images

Repetitive behaviors or mental acts

Nightmares and flashbacks of a distressing event, sleepwalking

Significant and repetitive avoidance of people, places, things and thoughts that make you nervous, uncomfortable

Detachment, numbing, "being in a daze"

Difficulties in relationships, such as having few relationships or not trusting others

## Emotions and feelings that interfere with functioning and quality of life

Depression, sadness, feeling "blue"

Loss of interest in things that used to be pleasurable

Feelings of worthlessness, low self-esteem

Emptiness, feeling alone or abandoned

Ashamed, rejected

Excessive guilt

Highly elevated mood, high self-esteem

Irritability

Anxiety, panic, fear, worry

Suspiciousness, paranoia

Anger, rage

Significant fears and phobias

## Other...

Why are You Seeking a Therapist?

## Problems that usually arise in infancy, childhood or adolescence

### Delays in achieving developmental milestones

- Sitting
- Crawling
- Walking
- Communicating

### Difficulties in learning

- Reading
- Writing
- Mathematics
- Other

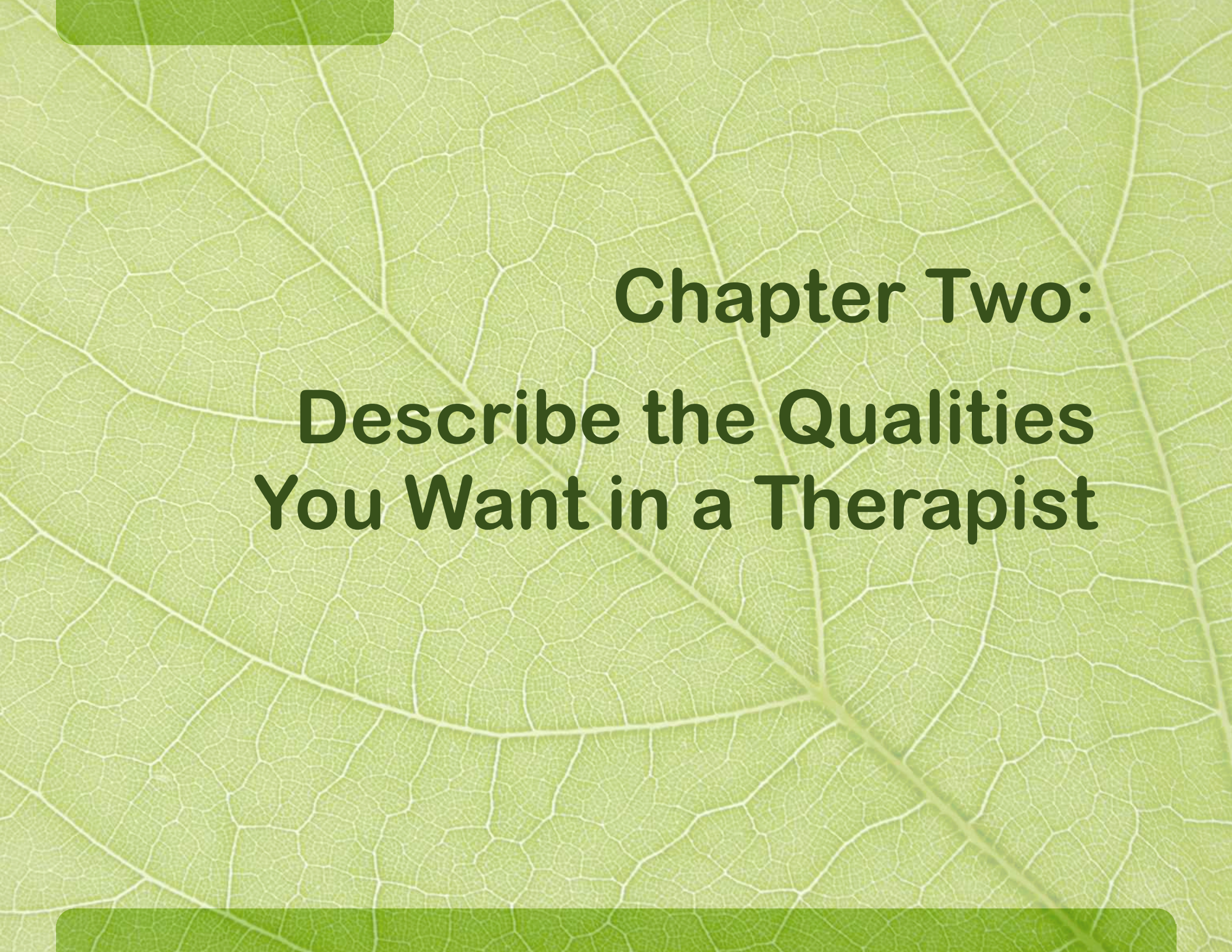
### Behavioral difficulties

- Bowel and bladder control
- Repetitive behaviors, interests, activities
- Inattentiveness
- Hyperactivity
- Impulsivity
- Aggression toward people, animals or property
- Theft, shoplifting, stealing
- Lying
- Breaking rules
- Negative, hostile, defiant behavior
- Eating non-nutritive substances
- Regurgitating and then re-chewing food
- Failure to eat enough to maintain appropriate weight
- Failure to speak in specific social situations
- Repetitive, nonfunctional motor behavior
  - Hand shaking or waving
  - Body rocking
  - Head banging
  - Placing objects in mouth
  - Biting self
  - Picking at skin or body
  - Hitting own body
- Tics (sudden, rapid, recurrent, non-rhythmic motor movement or vocalization)

### Difficulties in social skills

- Eye contact
- Facial expressions
- Not connecting with others emotionally
- Not making many friends
- Not having fun
- Challenges in relating to others in social situations

### Other...



# **Chapter Two:**

## **Describe the Qualities You Want in a Therapist**

Now that you have identified the topics you want to address, think about the factors that are important in a therapist. Use the next few pages to help guide your thoughts.

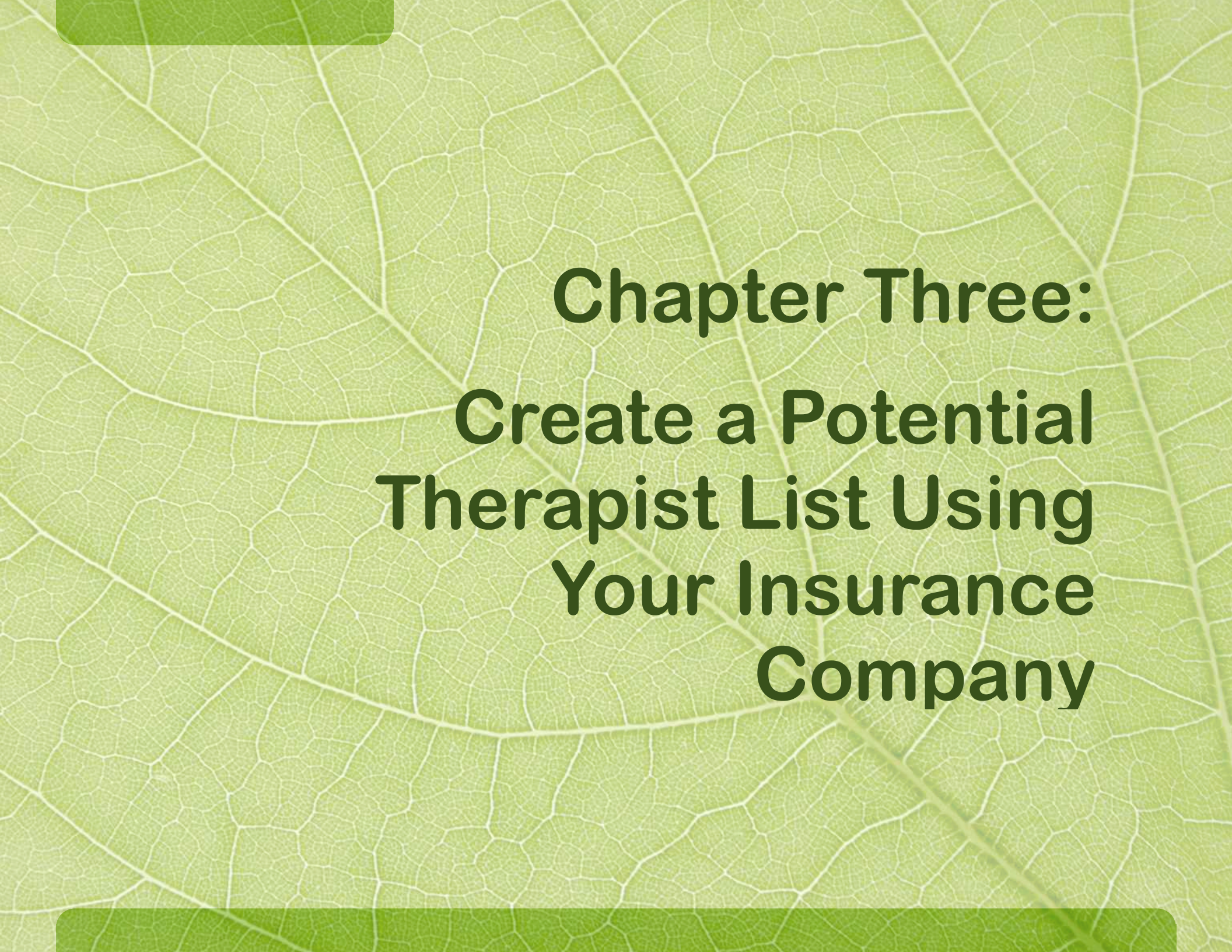
Would you prefer a female or male therapist, or is gender not important to you? Do you want individual therapy or do you prefer a group setting? What type of environment (hospital, non-hospital clinic, small practice) is ideal? Do any background factors, such as race, religion, sexual orientation, matter to you? Do you have special needs, such as a therapist who speaks a language other than English, can use sign language, has free parking, or has handicapped-accessibility to the building? Look through the list of questions on these pages and make note of the factors that your therapist must have (Imperative), and also note those factors that you would like (Preferred) your therapist to have but that may not be imperative. You may find that printing page 9 will help with this exercise.

There are many academic degrees, licensures, certifications and registrations that are used to identify therapists. Quite frankly, these degrees and certifications can be quite confusing and frustrating. But don't give up. Proceeding through these exercises will help you navigate through all of the initials and titles for therapists, and find someone who can help you.

# Chapter Two

Therapist Factor	Imperative	Preferred
Gender – male or female		
Individual or group therapy		
Type of setting		
Race or ethnic background		
Religion		
Sexual orientation		
Age		
Fluent in language other than English		
Able to use sign language		
Free parking		
Handicapped-accessibility to office		
Weekend hours		
Weekday evening hours		
In-network insurance provider (see Chapter 3)		
Out-of-network insurance provider (see Chapter 3)		
Sliding fee scale		
On or near bus or subway line		
Close to work, home, school		
Personal experience with the area you seek (such as recovered from substance use addiction or an eating disorder)		
Have served in military combat		
A specific professional degree (MD, PhD, PsyD, MA, MSW, LICSW, etc.)		
Specific training in problem area		
Other		

Describe the Qualities You Want in a Therapist



**Chapter Three:**  
**Create a Potential  
Therapist List Using  
Your Insurance  
Company**

The decision on whether to use insurance may be based on availability of coverage for mental health services in your insurance plan, and personal factors such as financial ability to pay for therapy out of your own pocket if needed or chosen. If you plan to use insurance, please read through this chapter thoroughly. If not, you can skip to Chapter 4.

Finding the right provider in your insurance network can be a challenge. Once you have defined the areas you want to address and outlined your wish-list of qualities you'd like in a therapist, your next step is to get a list of in-network providers from your insurance company.

You should be able to obtain this list either through your insurance company's website (to find out the address for your insurance provider, check your enrollment materials or the back of your insurance card) or by calling member services.

In larger metropolitan areas, this list may be overwhelmingly long, but many websites and member services representatives can reduce the list using key search factors that you've outlined in Chapter 2, such as geographic location, number of miles from a desirable midpoint, gender, and other critical factors such as therapists who can provide therapy in a language other than English.

How do you determine your insurance benefit coverage for mental health services? You may be able to get this information on the insurance company website or by calling member services. You'll want to ascertain what your benefits are for in-network and out-of-network providers by the level of service (outpatient therapy, intensive outpatient programming, day treatment or partial hospital programming or inpatient treatment) and the type of service (office visit for individual therapy, psychological testing, medication management or group therapy).

Next you'll want to know how much is your annual deductible, what co-payment or coinsurance would be due for each therapy session, the number of therapy appointments you are allowed in a calendar year and whether pre-authorization is needed for accessing mental health benefits.

The next few pages should guide you through the most common financial questions to ask your insurance company.

# Chapter Three

First, determine the **LEVEL** of service you think you need or want:

- Outpatient therapy – individual or group?
- Intensive outpatient programming
- Day treatment or partial hospital programming
- Inpatient treatment
- Residential treatment

Next, identify the **TYPE** of service you need or want:

- Office visit for individual or group therapy
- Psychological testing
- Medication management
- Other

Now, using the table below, contact your insurance company with the following questions based on the **level** and **type** of service you identified above:

In-Network Provider or  
Clinic / Hospital

Out-of-Network Provider or  
Clinic / Hospital

What is the amount of my annual deductible?

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What is the amount of my copay or coinsurance?

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How many outpatient visits are covered per year?

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How many inpatient days are covered per year?

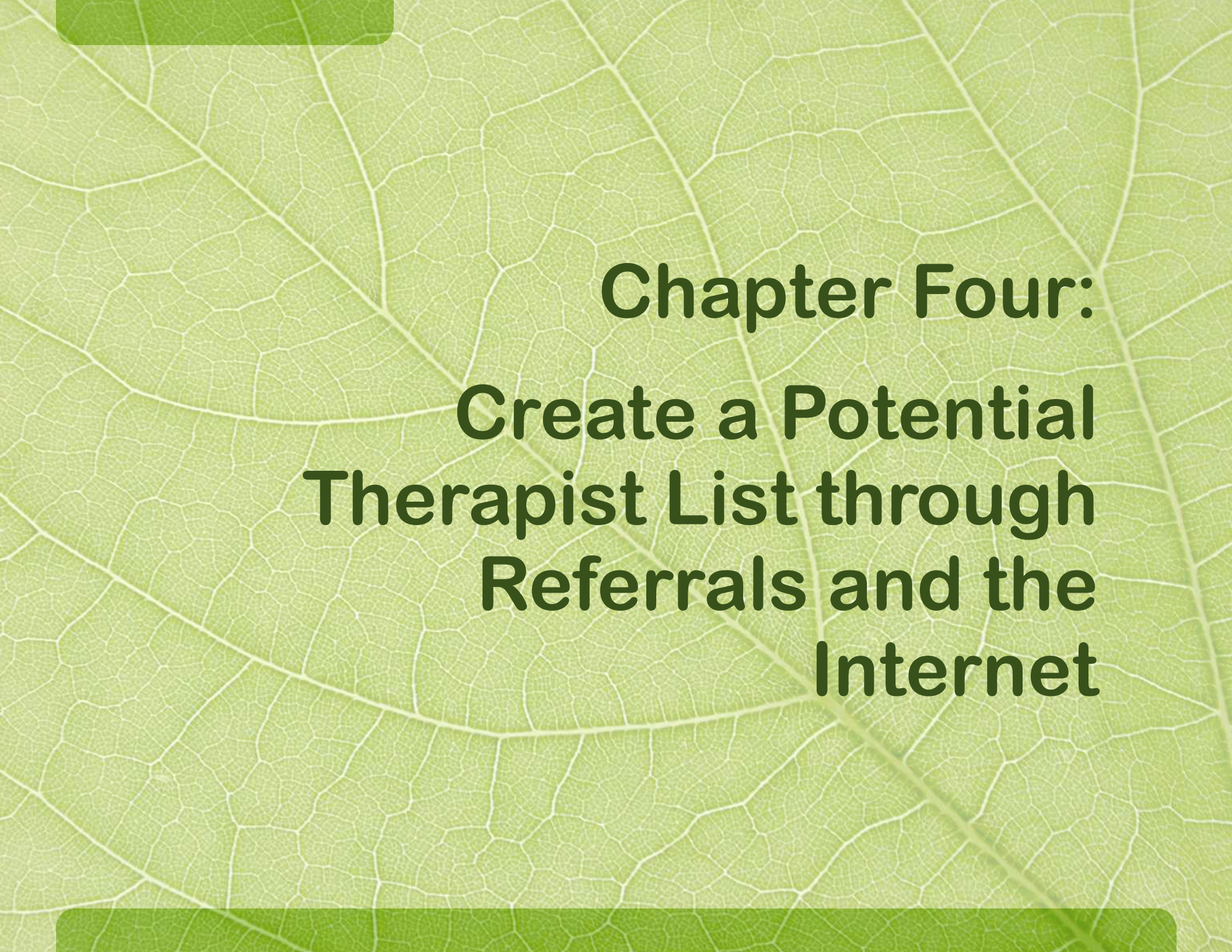
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Is pre-authorization needed for the level and type of service I'm seeking?

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Create a Potential Therapist List Using Your Insurance Company

Now you should be equipped with a list of providers that are in your insurance company's provider network and know the costs associated with therapy services provided by an in-network provider, as well as providers who are not in your insurance company's network (those that are considered "out-of-network"). Let's proceed to Chapter 4 to find additional ways to identify potential therapists.



**Chapter Four:  
Create a Potential  
Therapist List through  
Referrals and the  
Internet**

If you seek to expand the list of therapists provided by your insurance company or decide not to use insurance benefits, there are other ways to create a potential therapist list.

### Referrals

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One way to identify potential therapists is to ask other trusted individuals for referrals. Trusted individuals may include friends, other health care professionals such as a doctor or nurse, teachers, church members, staff at community clinics and other therapists that you know. The effort that you make with a few phone calls could be invaluable in finding a list of potential therapists.

### Internet

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Another means of identifying potential therapists that is increasing in value is the Internet. When you use specific websites or search engines, you can generate extensive lists of potential therapists.

### Provider Websites

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The following websites identify those individuals who are members of an organization focused on mental health. When you visit these sites, you may be able to learn about mental health issues and concerns, and identify therapists in your local area. Be aware that membership in these organizations does not imply that those therapists will be a good fit for you. It will still be important to carry out the exercises in the rest of this eBook.

Below are a few of the websites that provide search engines to find a therapist in your geographic area. You can click on each to be connected to them directly from this reader:

[National Register of Health Service Providers in Psychology](#)

[American Psychological Association](#)

[American Medical Association \(for Psychiatrists\)](#)

[National Association of Social Workers](#)

### Internet Search for Organizations that Specialize in a Problem Area

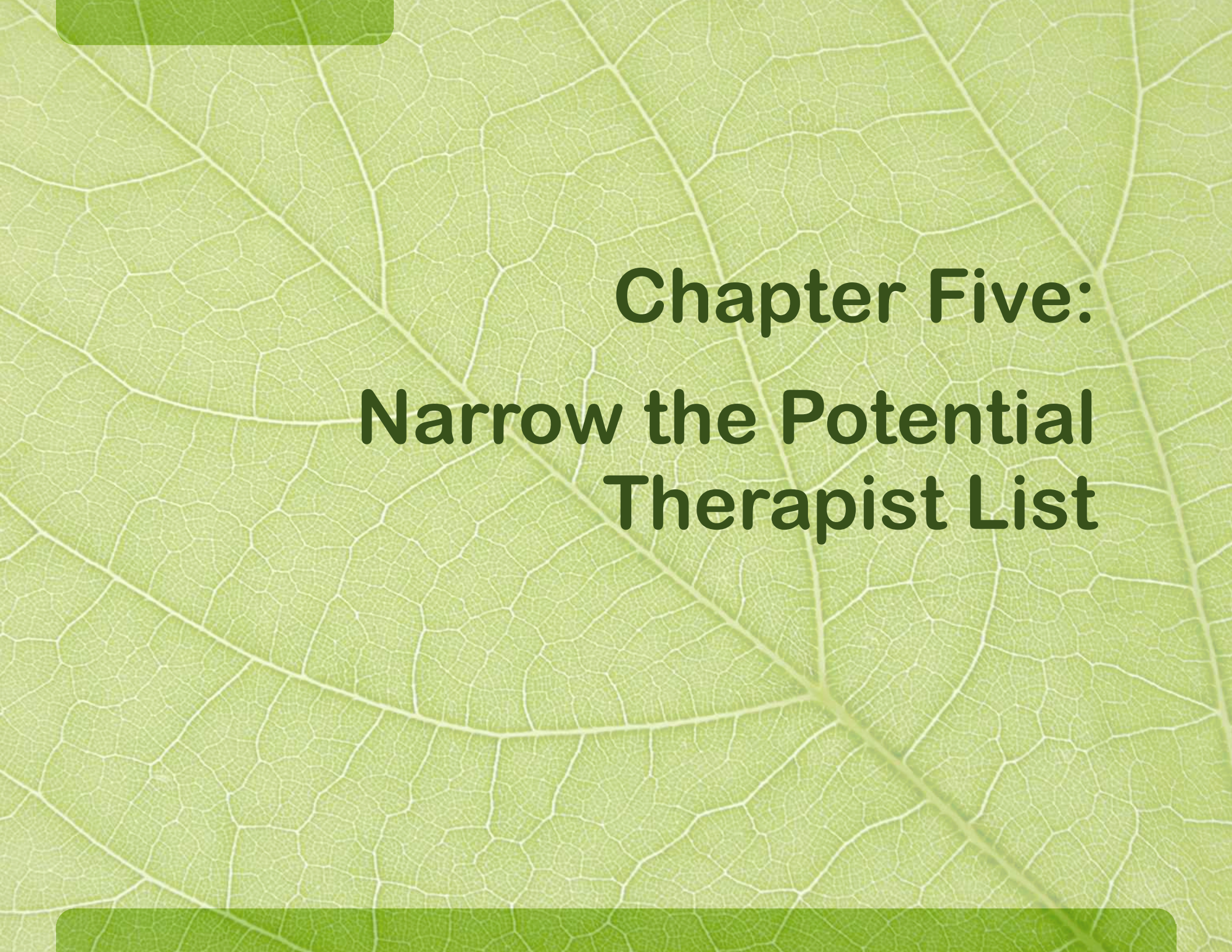
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You can also search for an organization that focuses on the primary problem(s) you want to address. You can locate these types of organizations by entering into an online search engine several key words or search terms. For example, if you want to seek treatment for symptoms of depression, you may want to search for “Depression Treatment.” Conducting a search like this should lead you to a listing of organizations and facilities that treat this type of psychological concern. Some organizations will publish listings of providers that provide treatment in that particular problem area, and may also sort by geographic area.

### Internet Search for Individuals that Provide Treatment in a Problem Area

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Another way to identify providers is to do an Internet search with the type of issue to be treated and the name of your city, such as “Depression therapist Roanoke.” The list that this search generates may be very limited, or quite long, depending on the problem area and the size of the city in which you seek treatment.



# **Chapter Five: Narrow the Potential Therapist List**

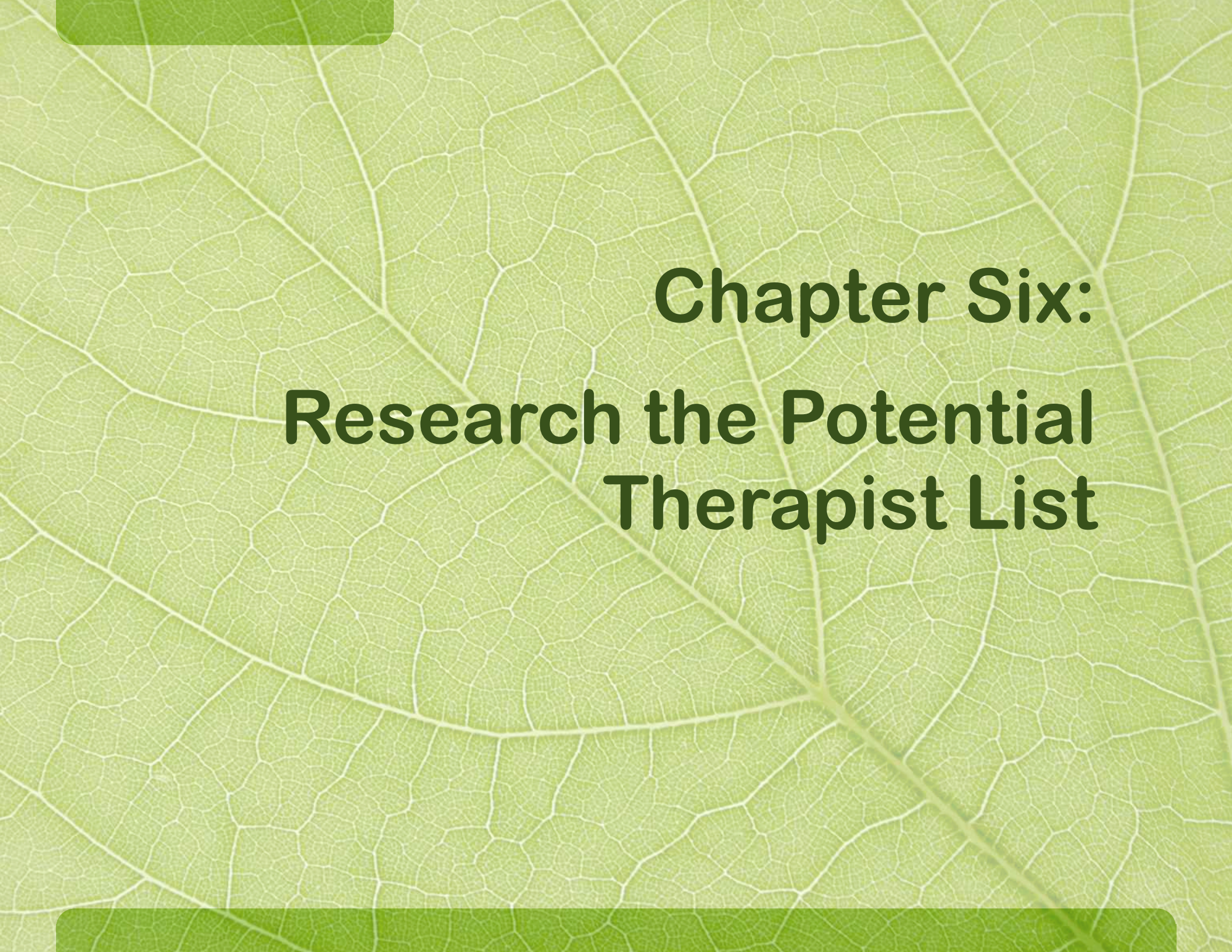
Now you should have a list of potential therapists. It's likely that your list is too long to research everyone so we need to do some pruning. Go back to your list of "Imperative" and "Preferred" therapist qualities from Chapter 2, and let's use the grid below to start some eliminations or rankings. Start by circling the Therapists that meet your "Imperative" criteria. For example...

Therapist	Imperative		Preferred	
	Female	Evening Hours	In-network	PhD or MD degree
Dr. Frasier Crane	No	Don't Know	Yes	Yes
Dr. Jonathan Katz	No	Don't Know	No	Yes
Dr. Lilith Sternin-Crane	Yes	Don't Know	No	Yes
Dr. Bob Newhart	No	Don't Know	No	Yes
Lucy Van Pelt	Yes	Don't Know	Yes	No
Dr. Jennifer Melfi	Yes	Don't Know	Yes	Yes
Dr. Leo Marvin	No	Don't Know	Yes	Yes
Dr. Ben Sobel	No	Don't Know	Yes	Yes

Using the example from the last page, we started with a list of 8 potential therapists, but ended up with only 3 of them because they met criteria for our “Imperative” list. Note that one of the imperative qualities is that the therapist provides evening hours, and we do not have that information on any of the potential therapist candidates.

Use the grid on the next page to identify your imperative and preferred qualities and narrow your potential therapist list by circling those potential therapists who meet your “Imperative” list or who are the closest for all of your “Preferred” factors.





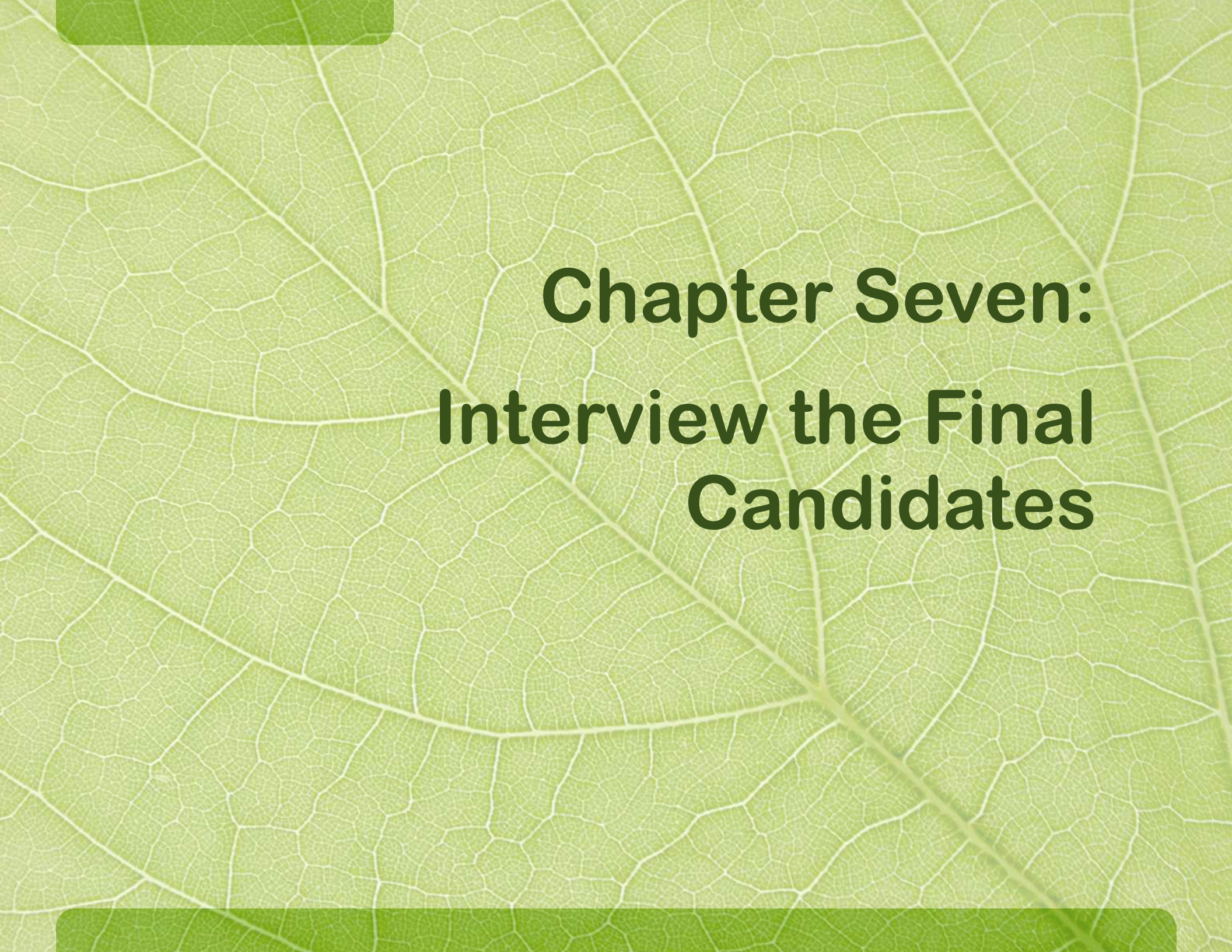
# **Chapter Six: Research the Potential Therapist List**

Hopefully, your list is down to a manageable number of therapists to whom you could place a call or do some research. Your next task is to identify the questions you want to ask these potential therapists.

First, review your therapist factors list. Pay attention to the “Imperative” column. Some “Imperatives” aren’t known by searching the Internet, but some are. You may try to type the name of a therapist into an Internet search engine to see if you can find out more information, such as location, hours of practice, organizational membership and degrees. But many excellent therapists are not represented or easily found on the Internet, so don’t stop there! A phone call may be your next step.

When you research your potential therapist list, by Internet or phone, try to focus your research on the questions that remain unanswered and that are important to your search. These may be questions pertaining to degrees, licensure, experience and training in this area, availability for new clients, and anything else on your list of imperatives.

The purpose of the research is to narrow down further the potential therapist list to a maximum of 5 (2-3 is preferable). Use the grid from Chapter 5 to make more notes on the potential therapists and whether they meet the factors that you have decided are imperative or preferred.



# **Chapter Seven: Interview the Final Candidates**

Because the goodness of fit between therapist and client is so important to a good therapeutic relationship and progress in treatment, it is now important to get a first-hand impression of each potential therapist by talking on the phone or scheduling an initial appointment. Perhaps your list is already down to 1 person and you decide to make the intake appointment. If this is true for you, please proceed with contacting the therapist and scheduling an appointment.

If your list is still long, go back through the imperative and preferred criteria for a potential therapist to narrow the list and conduct further research before you make your appointments.

If your list is 3 persons or fewer, congratulations! It is now time to call the potential therapists and/or make your appointments so you can do a final assessment of goodness of fit.

On the next page there are some topic areas that you may want to ask about via telephone or email.

### Licensure and Certification

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**“What licensure and certification do you have as a therapist?”**

Your therapist should be licensed by the appropriate board within his or her state of practice. In addition, your therapist may have additional credentials such as certification through the National Register of Health Service Providers in Psychology or be a Diplomate of the American Board of Professional Psychology.

### Degree and Training

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**“What is your academic degree and what training have you had in the field of mental health?”**

Your therapist will have an academic degree, such as a Master’s (MA, MS, or MSW) or Doctorate (PhD, PsyD, or MD), from an accredited and reputable academic institution. In addition to receiving an academic degree, therapists are required to have supervised clinical training, and the minimum amount of training will vary depending on the degree obtained and state licensing requirements.

### Fees

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“What do you charge for an initial appointment? How much do subsequent appointments cost?”

Determining the cost of your treatment may be an important factor in your decision-making. Some therapists take insurance whereas others don't. Some offer a sliding-fee scale based on your financial need. If possible, find out as many of the financial details of treatment before you start.

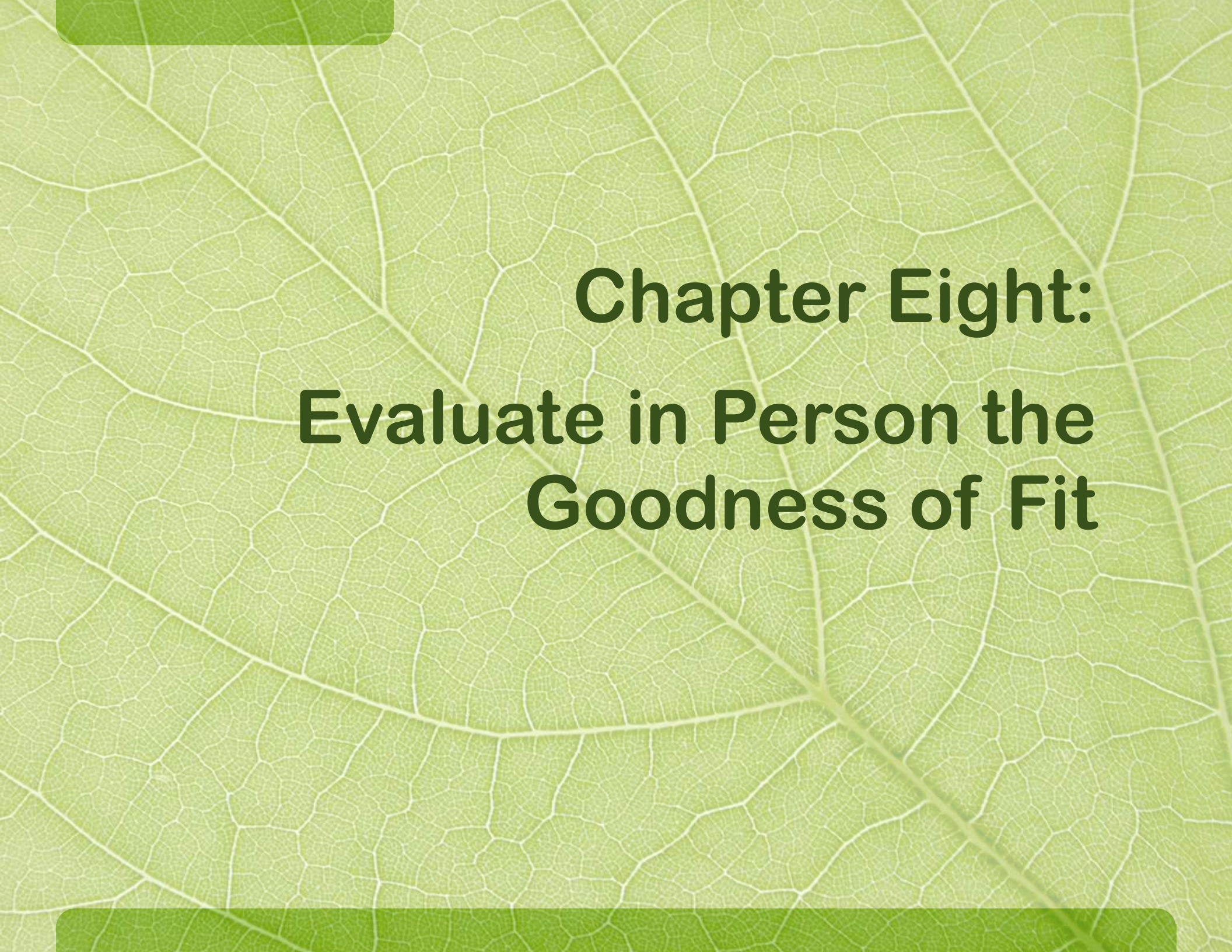
### Appointment Schedule

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“Are you taking new clients? When is the first opening for an initial appointment? What are your regular hours?”

You don't want to start with a therapist if availability is limited or the hours that you need aren't open. So, knowing the appointment schedule in advance may help you determine if a therapist is right for you.

Once you have a manageable number in your potential therapist list, it's time to set up an appointment for further evaluation of the goodness of fit.



# **Chapter Eight: Evaluate in Person the Goodness of Fit**

There are a number of important factors that contribute to a good therapist. Obviously, he or she needs to have an academic degree in a field of mental health and hold a current state license to practice. The therapist needs to be affordable to you and have office hour availability to provide the treatment.

When it comes down to the final aspects of the ‘goodness of fit’ between you and your therapist, you’ll want to evaluate whether he or she has the wisdom and experience that is needed to effectively promote improvement of your problems and concerns, and the empathy and compassion to help you talk about aspects of your life that may be very painful to discuss and confront.

The questions on the following pages are best asked in person so that you can get the fullest sense of how well the therapist might work for you. Use these questions as a guide – you do not need to ask any or all of them – but the answers to these inquiries may help you make your final therapist decision. Try to see if the therapist’s answers are somewhat consistent with your own beliefs.

### Regarding the particular problem area(s)

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“What are the causes of this type of problem?”

“What are the types of treatment or theoretical orientations that are often used to treat this problem?”

“How would you approach treating this problem?”

“What expertise and experience do you have in treating this problem?”

### Regarding the therapeutic relationship

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“What can I expect from treatment?”

“What do you expect from me?”

### During the course of the meeting and after this appointment, you want to do one final assessment that addresses how you felt during the meeting

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How well did the therapist listen to you?

Did you feel understood, safe, valued?

Did you feel like you could trust and understand the therapist?

Did the therapist remember important facts, what you said?

Did the treatment plan seem reasonable to you?

**Now that you have a good feeling about the therapist and have answered “yes” to most if not all of the desired qualities in a therapist, pat yourself on the back with Congratulations! Good luck in your therapy journey, and reassess the goodness of fit as needed.**

Finding a therapeutic relationship that is a good fit for you may sound like a challenge, yet it is an essential component toward being able to achieve good results in psychotherapy. Use the steps outlined in this eBook as a guide to finding a therapist that is skilled in your areas of need and possesses the qualities that you desire. By spending some time in the beginning understanding and identifying a good therapist fit, you can reap more significant rewards during your therapeutic journey.

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**Diann M. Ackard, PhD** is a licensed psychologist whose passion is to help empower others to improve their lives. She is a private practitioner, an **Adjunct Assistant Professor in the Division of Epidemiology and Community Health at the University of Minnesota** and a consultant to several clinical, research and academic groups, and holds positions on boards of non-profit organizations that promote the health and well-being of youth and adults.

The vision of the **National Register of Health Service Providers in Psychology** is to improve the health of a diverse and global community. The National Register credentials licensed psychologists, promotes credentialed psychologists to consumers, provides distinction and value to its Registrants, guides psychology students toward credentialing, and enhances psychologists' contribution to integrated health care.