

How to find the right therapist

Some helpful tips on what to look for

You phone a therapist who diagnoses your problem immediately. She assures you she can solve your problem in only a few sessions, and you book an appointment, confident you have made the right choice.

But have you?

Therapists who quickly identify your problem and how to fix it are probably *not* good therapists! And those who seem uncertain, who don't want to give you answers right away, may very well be *good* therapists.

That's because a therapist is an expert on psychology, but the expert on you is—you. A good therapist wants to understand what you're going through and not offer quick, ready-made solutions. You don't want a therapist who has all the answers. You want one who knows which questions to ask.

So what *should* you look for? Here are some helpful tips.

QUALIFICATIONS

Unlike other provinces, British Columbia does not license therapists or regulate who can call themselves "counsellors." So make sure the person you talk to is either a Certified Clinical Counsellor or a Registered Clinical Counsellor (RCC). Members of both groups have master's degrees in psychology and have undergone a rigorous certification procedure. Registered Clinical Counsellors generally meet more rigorous training, experience and supervision requirements, however. If you have supplementary health insurance, your visit to an RCC may be covered. If your visit is insurance-related (because of a car accident, for instance), it may be covered. You may also be able to claim

an income tax deduction for your visit to an RCC.

YOU GET WHAT YOU PAY FOR

Many agencies offer free or low-cost counselling, but the counsellors are often unqualified or minimally qualified. They are (hopefully) better than nothing, but this type of counselling should only be considered as a last resort.

GOOD COUPLES COUNSELLORS WON'T TAKE SIDES

If you phone a relationship counsellor who doesn't seem to want to hear your side of the story, that's probably a good thing! Good counsellors aren't interested in issues, but in how you and your partner *deal* with issues. Good counsellors want to get at the feelings behind your anger. They want to know how communication breaks down. They don't care who's right and who's wrong.

EXPERIENCE

It goes without saying that experience makes a difference, but so does *life* experience. If you have the sense that the therapist really doesn't have a clue

what you're going through, you might want to look elsewhere.

DON'T GET HUNG UP ON TECHNIQUE

People often tell me they are looking for a certain type of therapist, such as a cognitive behavioural therapist. But the truth is, it doesn't really matter what techniques a therapist uses. A good therapist is a good therapist no matter what techniques he or she uses. —the type of therapist you really need is a *good* therapist!

Good couples counsellors don't care who's right and who's wrong

THREE IMPORTANT QUALITIES

Here are three essential qualities of a good therapist.

Empathy

Empathy is not to be confused with sympathy. Sympathetic people feel sorry for you. Empathetic people try to get into your skin and experience your situation as if it were their own. They're sensitive and understanding. When it

comes to choosing a therapist, no quality is more important than empathy.

So take the time to talk to potential counsellors. Do you get the feeling they're hearing you? That they care about what you're going through? That they want to understand you? That they are someone you can talk to? And if your gut tells you "no," keep looking.

Ask them how they are going to deal with your issues. If they offer a quick diagnosis or a ready-made treatment plan, beware! They're not taking the time to listen to you and figure out what really fits for you. A good therapist will make a remark like "I need to understand what's going on, then we can work on a plan together."

Openness

Good therapists don't hide behind a professional façade. Yes, they know something about psychology, but they don't know anything about *you*. If a therapist seems not to have the answers and is struggling to understand you, that's probably a good thing! Look for therapists who say things like "help me out here," and "I'm not sure I'm getting

this." They're looking for advice on the subject you're an expert at—yourself.

Respect

Good therapists make people feel good about themselves, and the progress they're making. They make people feel supported and safe, not slighted.

Beware of anyone who puts you down with remarks like "Hah! You think *you* have problems?," or "When are you going to man up?" (A good therapist may, however, "confront" a client with something positive, such as "I don't think you appreciate what a huge accomplishment that was.")

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BE PATIENT

People coming to me for the first time often have the attitude, "here's my problem. Fix it." As a therapist, I rarely find that the problem is what people think it is! For instance, I often counsel people with anger issues, who are convinced they're too aggressive. In

most cases, they're actually too *passive*, stuffing feelings of irritation and annoyance until they explode as anger.

So if you think you know what your problem is, you're probably wrong! It's important for both you and the therapist to get to the root of the matter. So please, be patient.

MONEY

This is a difficult issue, but one that needs to be addressed up front. If you want help, but are struggling financially, many therapists are willing to give you a break. But don't expect them to do any haggling if you arrive in a late-model Porsche! And out of courtesy, please don't wait until the end of the session to confess that you're strapped for cash.

ASK QUESTIONS

I appreciate it when people ask questions. It helps me understand them better, and I'm sure my answers help them as well. People are often apologetic for phoning or emailing me, but that's what I'm here for! Also,

people struggling with addictions or sexual violence sometimes want to know if I've been through a similar experience myself. It's a fair question, and don't be afraid to ask it!

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BE PERSISTENT

If you don't find what you're looking for, keep looking. Finding out what you *don't* want is useful information. And don't be afraid to talk about what you want. A therapy session is time set aside for *you*. You should get to decide how to spend that time.

And good luck with your search!

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