

Finding a Therapist Who Won't Make You Crazy(er)

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As a therapist in private practice I hear lots of inspiring as well as cringe-inspiring stories from clients about previous therapy experiences. Finding a good therapist is like finding a good pair of jeans: it's a matter of fit, but if the material is bad, the result is bad. From the revolting psychiatrist who sexually abused a teenage girl, to the couple's therapist who yelled at the man during session, "your wife is fine and this is all your fault," to a woman who was told by her therapist "you don't need therapy, you're fine" when she was clearly depressed, there are plenty of examples of people struggling and trying to get help being made even more anxious and unhealthy by the very people who are supposed to be helping them.

I once heard a theory about professional competence that has always stuck with me. It's the theory of thirds, and it goes like this: in any given profession, one third of the practitioners are technicians: well trained and decent at what they do, one third are magicians: beyond the basics, they offer creativity and insight that is unique to how their minds work, and one third are the toilets: they stink. This division is obviously over simplified but useful nonetheless.

The problem is trying to assess the ability of a professional who has a knowledge base different from your own. For instance I barely check the oil dipstick in my car, so until I found an auto mechanic who was skillful as well as honest, I was at the mercy of unscrupulous mechanics whose work I had no way of checking.

I found my mechanic exactly the way I recommend people find their therapist: I asked around. If asking friends to recommend a therapist feels too personal to reveal, you can also ask your doctor, the E.A.P. provider (employee assistance program) at your job, your church leader, or anyone else whose perspective and judgment you trust. You can also use the old and frequently true line "I'm asking for a friend of mine."

The internet can also be a good place to do preliminary research: these days many therapists have websites with their practice specialty, philosophy, professional memberships, as well as articles they have written or conferences they have spoken at. If your perspective therapist blogs (you can check out my trauma blog at www.seattletherapist.wordpress.com) you can get an even better sense of his or her professional and personal approach to mental health.

Be wary of therapists who treat every mental health condition under the sun: aside from those who practice in rural areas, most skillful therapists specialize to become truly expert at treating a limited range of diagnosis.

Next, call a few therapists who seem like a potential fit and spend a few minutes talking on the phone. Do they sound like someone you can work with? Are they warm? Do they sound intelligent and interested in your situation? Have they worked with other people dealing with similar situations or

problems? If they don't have any openings, ask who they would recommend. Good therapists can refer potential clients to other good therapists.

Before you walk into a therapist's office keep in mind that therapy is not friendship. Therapy involves a balanced combination of support and challenge. Therapists who are too supportive will not help you develop insight and change problematic patterns. On the other hand, therapists that are too confrontational don't provide the emotional safety needed for change. Everyone has their own unique spot on the support-confront continuum so you need to find a therapist whose blend works for you. For this reason, a therapist who worked wonders for your neighbor may leave you feeling needed and annoyed.

Finally, think about your goals for attending therapy. Some common ones include communicating with and relating better to the people in your life, rediscovering enjoyment, reacting more calmly to life's challenges, not beating yourself up emotionally, learning how to set boundaries with others, letting go of old resentments, feeling more hopeful about your future.

Write down and bring your goals into your therapy session. Talk with your therapist about what you are looking for. You have a much better chance of getting there if you have a destination in mind.

Enjoy your journey! Good therapy is like a lush, healing garden: you will find beauty, perspective, gratitude and insight for yourself and your life experiences where you once only saw weeds and rubble.

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Side Bar: there are many initials (LICSW, LMFT, RC, etc) indicating education and licensure and most consumers have no idea what they mean. The important thing to look for is the letter "L" which means "licensed" without the word "associate" before it. Why? An "associate license" is someone who is not yet licensed. A licensed mental health professional (LICSW, LMFT, for example) is someone with a master's degree or a doctorate in the field of mental health, two years full time post-graduation work as a therapist, supervision by a licensed therapist, who has passed a nationally accredited competency exam, and receives ongoing education to maintain their license.

Beware that in Washington State there are "Registered Counselors" which means nothing more than someone who sent a check to the department of health and may or may not have any actual mental health training. As of July of this year, registered counselors are being re-named and subdivided into various "Associate Licenses" except for the ones who are exempt from the new licensure laws because they have been practicing for five or more years as registered counselors. No doubt some of these registered counselors are great at what they are doing, but if I go to the butcher shop I want to know I'm buying a steak, and not maybe a steak, maybe meat-flavored tofu.