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Ask a psychotherapist

Question: I read with interest your recent column about the different types of psychotherapists but how do you find one that's really good? I had a friend who had a really bad experience with a therapist once and it's made me nervous about calling one for help for myself, which I could really use. Can you tell me how I can find a good one?

Answer: This is an excellent question. Training and education, unfortunately, do not guarantee that all therapists will be great at what they're trained to do. As in any profession, there will be some practitioners who are less effective. Occasionally, there will be a practitioner who probably shouldn't be in the field at all.

That having been said, however, there are many things you can do to make it unlikely that you will encounter one of them. First, do some research. Most psychotherapists have websites these days and, by law, all who practice psychotherapy in Ontario are already or must soon be registered with a College that regulates their training and activities

A website can tell you what issues a psychotherapist specializes in treating along with their education and level of experience. It can also give you a taste of their personality and style. If after viewing some websites, you feel drawn to one or more individual therapists, give each one a call. Say that you are shopping for a therapist and ask whether they will spend a few minutes chatting with you.

Most therapists will gladly spend some time with you on the phone whether or not you decide to book an appointment with them. Pay attention to how you feel while chatting with each therapist. Is this someone you feel comfortable talking to? If so, it may be worthwhile setting up a first session with this person. If you're not sure, you can always say that you want to think about it a little before making an appointment.

During a first appointment, pay attention to how you feel in their presence and in their office space. Is it a comfortable setting for you? How do you experience the therapist? Is she or he warm, engaged, a good listener, a serious but compassionate person, able to smile or laugh with you when appropriate? Or, is the therapist mostly silent, listening without seeming to be engaged? Is the pace at which they speak neither too slow nor too pressured to suit your style of conversing? Finally, and perhaps most importantly, would you like to see this person again? Paying attention to such things will tell you whether you have a good ?fit? with the therapist. This is essential because outcome research (whether therapy works or not) has consistently shown that the quality of the therapeutic relationship regardless of type of therapy practiced is the single strongest predictor of therapy success.

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