



Thinking of Counselling?

People turn to counselling, be it individual, marital, family or group, at times having done little or no homework on the service provider. There is more to choosing a counsellor than simply picking up the phone and making an appointment.

Anyone may call himself or herself a counsellor, so choosing on the basis of this title offers no insight into the person's credentials or credibility and offers no degree of protection in the event of poor service.

Titles, such as social worker, psychologist or psychiatrist are known as "designated titles" and can only be used by persons with the corresponding credentials. Further, these persons should be members in good standing with their respective licensing bodies. This at least suggests that the person providing the service has some degree of academic training and offers you some degree of protection in the event of poor or improper service. It still does not speak to their specific training or experience.

The only way you can begin to know if a person is qualified to render you service is to ask directly about their qualifications, experience and areas of expertise.

Thereafter, it is advisable to ask if he or she has knowledge and experience specifically on your matters of concern. It is also reasonable to ask about the approach to service to be sure there is a goodness of fit between their approach and what you are seeking.

Beyond determining the credentials, experience, expertise of the counsellor and the goodness of fit between what you are seeking and what they may offer, the counsellor should ask several questions about you and your situation. They too should make sure there is a reasonable match between what you are seeking and what they may offer. Simply setting an appointment may not be in either party's interest and it might be best to direct you elsewhere in view of a poor match.

In terms of questions from the counsellor, he or she should enquire as to the nature of the service you are seeking, why you are seeking the service and what issues you seek to address.

Further, the counsellor should ask about matters of domestic violence, particularly if you are coming with your partner. In so doing, the counsellor should be sure that your joint attendance, wherein you may talk about sensitive issues, will not put you at risk of harm or reprisal if your partner takes exception to what is discussed. The counsellor should also ask about drug and alcohol consumption to be assured clients arrive sober. You may also be asked about any criminal convictions.

The point of the counsellor's questions is to be assured he or she may truly be helpful, that the situation is safe for you to attend and that the situation is also safe for him or her to meet with you.

To begin your search for a counsellor, you can start by asking credible sources of information such as your physician, clergy or other professional service providers. Beyond that, you may ask trusted friends or family members. You can also go to the telephone directory, yellow pages or Internet, but be aware that a good ad or web page doesn't necessarily mean the counsellor is qualified or experienced. Ask about the qualifications and experience directly even when you receive a referral from a trusted source.

If the counsellor doesn't ask you questions prior to setting an appointment, it may be a sign that you should seek someone else as that person may be indiscriminate as to who they serve. Worse still, if there are abuse issues that you haven't been asked about prior to meeting, that counsellor's approach may put you at risk.

As with any other service, make an informed choice and then the likelihood of that service meeting your needs will improve.

In the end, when seeking counselling, it's about your needs, not the counsellor's.

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Gary Direnfeld is a social worker. Courts in Ontario, Canada, consider him an expert on child development, parent-child relations, marital and family therapy, custody and access recommendations, social work and an expert for the purpose of giving a critique on a Section 112 (social work) report. Call him for your next conference and for expert opinion on family matters. Services include counselling, mediation, assessment, assessment critiques and workshops.