



### 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 counselor than simply picking up the phone and making an appointment.

Anyone may call himself or herself a counselor, so choosing on the basis of this title offers no insight into the provider'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 the specific training or experience of these service providers.

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 also advisable to ask if the service provider has knowledge and experience on your matters of concern. It is also reasonable to ask about the counselor's 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 and expertise of the service provider and the goodness of fit between what you are seeking and what the service provider may offer, the service provider should ask several questions about you and your situation. The service provider 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 then direct you elsewhere in view of a poor match.

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

The point of the service providers questions is to be assured they may truly be helpful, that the situation is safe for you to attend and that the situation is also safe for the service provider.

To begin your search for a counselor, 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 or yellow pages, but be aware that a good ad or web page doesn't necessarily mean the service provider is qualified or experienced.

Seek out the qualifications and experience directly. Even when you receive a referral from a trusted source, ask your questions. If the service provider doesn't ask you questions prior to setting an appointment, it may be a sign that you should seek someone else as that service provider may be indiscriminate as to who they service best serves.

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 service, it's about your needs, not the counselor'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.