

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Choosing the Right Professional for Support with a Personal Issue

You don't need to be suffering from a serious mental health problem to benefit from the support of a counselor. There are many circumstances, such as relationship loss, serious illness or accident, stress at work or feelings of low self-esteem, for which a counselor can provide a safe and private atmosphere for self-discovery and working through the problem.

Choosing to speak to a counselor can be a positive step in helping you cope with numerous problems. Once you are ready to seek help, it’s time to think about what help to seek.

Finding someone in the helping profession, whether a counselor, social worker, psychologist or psychiatrist, is much like looking for a new doctor or dentist. Before you make the call, it’s a good idea to know a little about different types of professionals and how they provide help.

Make Some Personal Choices

The most important consideration is that the helper suits you. You need to feel comfortable and safe talking with them. It is also important to prepare yourself for what to expect from counselling. All licensed helping professionals have a code of ethics. You should expect a high level of professionalism. In other words, the person who is supposed to help you should not be acting inappropriately or making you feel uneasy or scared.

Some considerations for initial inquiries include:

- Decide whether you have a preference for a male or a female therapist.
- Think about location and how far you are willing to go, especially if you live in a small town.
- Consider accessibility to the therapist and how important it is for you to be able to have emergency access 24 hours a day.
- Are you covered by a health care plan for these kinds of services or is cost something to ask about?

Therapist Qualifications

Every province has slightly different requirements for licensure within the helping professions, but there are some consistencies to keep in mind when deciding on which type will be right for you.

Psychiatrist. Individuals with this title are medical doctors who have completed a residency in psychiatry. They may or may not have a more specific training or type of therapy, but what they can do that others can’t, is prescribe medication. If you think that your issue is physiological, seeing a psychiatrist may be appropriate. Some people choose to see a psychiatrist for medication and also a psychologist to work through personal issues.

Psychologist. In order to be licensed as a psychologist, individuals must have completed a doctorate in psychology. This means that they have a Ph.D., a Psy.D. or an Ed.D., as well as extensive post-graduate

training.

Counselor/Therapist. Most counselors or psychotherapists have at least a Master's degree and clinical training. It is good practice for these counselors to be licensed in their province but they may not be and may not have a Master's degree. This is because the term "counselor" is not a regulated title. Anyone can use it.

Social Worker. Social workers have completed a Master's degree in social work. They also have clinical training and are licensed with the College of Social Workers in their province. Generally speaking, social workers work with family issues such as domestic violence, divorce, or child protection. They can work in organizations or have private practices like psychologists or psychiatrists.

Whatever professional you choose, make sure to ask about their training and whether they have experience working with the kind of issue you are dealing with.

The Importance of the Right Fit

Having good rapport with a counselor is one of the most important aspects of a good therapeutic experience. Therapists who are caring, empathic, accepting and encourage risk taking and mastery are more likely to have clients who benefit from therapy.

The best way to assess if you have good rapport with you counselor is to ask yourself a few simple questions about how you feel after a session:

- Did you feel comfortable, listened to and like you could trust the therapist?
- Was the therapist open to the manner in which you presented your history?
- Did you feel a connection with the therapist?
- Did the atmosphere feel right for you?
- Did the therapist push you to reveal things that were uncomfortable too quickly?
- Were your needs acknowledged?
- Did the therapist behave in a professional manner? Did they explain how therapy works and were you able to set some goals together for your sessions?

A therapist may not be the right choice for you if:

- The therapist is setting goals for you that you are uncomfortable with.
- The therapist has acted or spoken in a way that is against your morals and values.
- A therapist has touched you without your permission. Some will touch you on the shoulder to offer support, but if the therapist makes any gestures which make you uncomfortable, you should tell him or her. If the therapist does not respect your wishes, or is making sexual advances, leave immediately. It is unethical for therapists to approach you sexually or to have a relationship outside of therapy.
- The therapist has tried to elicit help from you for his or her own problems, charities or outside business interests.

If a therapist is behaving unethically, or you feel uncomfortable in any way, or even if you simply believe that it's not "the right fit," it is perfectly all right to leave and try someone else.
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Finding the right help can be challenging, but well worth the effort. A successful therapeutic relationship can do worlds of good for a wide variety of issues you may face in life. If you are uncertain as to whether you need to seek out professional help, search for the article “Seeking Professional Help with a Personal Issue”.