



The Mulberry Report

Solutions For Life

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Choosing a Mental Health Therapist

By Ralph Nichols, LCSW

Not all that long ago, the availability of someone to see for personal problems was fairly limited. Likewise, even acknowledging that a problem existed was not easy, so many of us just shoved it into denial mode and did our best to cope. There was also that feeling of embarrassment thinking that one might need help.

In the early '60s there were only five psychiatrists in Evansville, and only three of those were in private practice. Therapists with mental health training were only beginning to move into the area, especially as the original child guidance and adult mental health agencies began to expand. This expansion happened as a result of the passage of the federal Community Mental Health Center legislation signed into law by President John F. Kennedy. In addition, there was the presence of counselors available through Catholic Charities and Family and Children's Service (now Lampion Center) both with a rich history of providing counseling to individuals and families. And, as always, there was, and continues to be, the family pastor.

Today, the Evansville community has a large source of mental health related counselors (sometimes referred to as psychotherapists, clinical social workers, psychologists) working in a number of agencies as well as in private practice.

The dilemma now is where does one go and who is this counselor? Making the choice is not always easy. Sometimes word-of-mouth can lead a person to inquire, while in other instances the therapist one sees may have been a result of a crisis in which there simply was no time to "shop around." Then there is the critical piece of being able to make that all-important clinical "connection" known as the "therapeutic alliance" between patient and therapist.

Mental health related information in the form of self-help books, newspaper articles and TV talk shows are more prominent now than ever before. Whole sections of book stores are identified as "mental health"; TV programs often feature mental health professionals analyzing any number of traumatic events that have become headline news; and, weekly TV programs are hosted by mental health professionals. The exposure to all this information can be the means by which an individual decides that maybe seeing a counselor is not a bad idea after all.

Fortunately we are in an era of certifications and licensure. This makes it far less likely for anyone to simply hang out a shingle announcing his presence to help with personal problems. The question becomes how can one be assured of the

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“Patience and Perseverance have a magical effect before which difficulties disappear and obstacles vanish.”

- John Quincy Adams

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therapeutic competence of the therapist; how is that therapist going to help; and, how much will this cost?

To enhance your experience in finding appropriate treatment, consider doing the following:

- Check your health benefits plan to see what therapists are in your network as providers.
- Check with your family physician, pastor or even a friend who might know of someone locally.
- If you are employed, check with your human resources department as a staff member might be able to direct you to a resource.
- When making a call to any provider group, let the person know what your personal difficulties are and ask if there is a therapist with specialty in that area (e.g., someone who does marital therapy; someone who has specialty in areas of anxiety, depression, or someone with specialty in seeing children and adolescents).

In making choices the key will be the quality of the first meeting with the therapist whether the therapist was recommended by a friend, pastor or family physician. The key variable will be if, during the course of the first meeting, the patient (sometimes referred to as client) feels a sense of comfort and trust. If that occurs, then the process of developing a therapeutic alliance begins and can anchor the patient in the therapy process. The journey then begins and can be life-changing.

When seeing a therapist for the first time, do not hesitate to ask questions about experience and training. Be sure there is a listing of the therapist’s professional code of ethics displayed, as well as licensure and university degree(s). Be sure the therapist is in your network of health insurance providers, and what your co-pay will be following each psychotherapy/counseling session. Never forget that you are the “customer” and you deserve the very best from your therapist. The therapist is there to help you develop strategies to deal with personal/family issues and serve as a resource for helping you to move forward with the psychological tools needed to persevere and get past the issues that have caused personal difficulties.

Mr. Nichols is a graduate of Indiana University School of Social Work with over 38 years of clinical experience in mental health. He is the Executive Director of Mulberry Center, Inc.