



# mindset

BY KAREN STEWART, MA

## training of our healers

One of the most exciting changes in health care today is the increasing wealth of treatment options available—from conventional western medicine to a wide range of alternative choices. As the inter-connectedness of the mind and body become understandable, the importance of emotional well-being in our overall health is clear. The value of yoga, Tai Chi, and meditation is firmly established. The use of herbs, acupuncture, magnets, and other forms of intervention are becoming popular. Healing touch and a myriad of types of massage offer relief for many.

Besides the practitioners of counseling, psychology, psychiatry, and social work for emotional problems, we now have marriage and family therapists, drug and alcohol counselors, and coaches for many disorders. The number and variety of healers offering services can be bewildering at times. How does a consumer differentiate the innovative from the fringe? How do you evaluate the training and credentials of the person you are considering?

Our family physician is usually our first source of referrals. Their expertise and experience with a wide variety of professionals make them a trustworthy source of recommendations. The recommendation of a trusted friend or colleague gives us the “inside scoop” about the person and their effectiveness. Friends or professionals in the health care arena are another source of referrals or information about the treatment or service offered.

### ABUNDANT INFORMATION; THE CHALLENGE OF EVALUATING IT

Another approach gaining in popularity is the Internet. The latter has information about any medical condition and possible form of treatment, but it is often hard to evaluate the validity of claims. Using the information as a starting place and taking it to your family physician can be helpful in evaluating resources.

Once you have selected a treatment approach, based on referral, research and/or recommendations, how do you go about evaluating a particular practitioner? Their website should be a good source of information about their training, credentials, licensing, experience, and practice. Degrees and certificates ensure a standard course of study has been pursued. Being a licensed practitioner indicates that the state has played a part in ensuring that certain training requirements have been met and that ethical standards of practice are expected to be followed. Often there are independent reviews about professionals that can be very helpful. Unfortunately, however, there is no foolproof way of making sure someone is both competent and ethical—much less whether you will actually like them. Healthy skepticism is a good initial approach.

This area is fortunate to have an abundance of practitioners, so we can afford to be quite selective. I believe you can tell a lot from the initial call for an appointment. Does the person sound like someone you would

want to get to know you? Are their office staff respectful and courteous? Non-defensive answers to questions and a willingness to make sure that you understand their qualifications and approach is always a good sign.

For all of our helpers we want a “good fit,” we want someone we feel confident about and can trust. Especially when it comes to talk therapies, we want someone with whom we feel comfortable, where we easily understand each other, where we feel the other person “gets us.”

### THE PRACTICE OF PSYCHOLOGY: TRAINING, COMPASSION, RESPECT

It has been more than 40 years since I entered a Master’s level program in psychology. I went on to complete the coursework and practicums for the PhD, but never finished my dissertation. I practice as a master’s level psychologist. The years of my training were some of the happiest of my life. I loved the study of psychology and I have always felt privileged to have found work that I love. I was required to be in therapy as part of my training, though I would have done it even if not required. I feel strongly that anyone who is working with others, should have done their own work, though many programs do not require it.

This field is in a continual state of expansion. The increasing depth of understanding of our complexity as human beings has been a rich source of professional as well as personal growth. When I think back to what I have learned, it is not the specific content that is the most important. In fact, one professor observed that psychologists were born and not made. I disagreed vehemently with him then, invested as I was in the quality of my training. Now, however, I believe he was right. While I still firmly believe in a rigorous course of study for any profession, I do believe that effective treatment of emotional disorders requires compassion, a generosity of spirit, and a deep respect for humanity—and these cannot be taught. What was valuable about my training was that it fostered a love of learning about the human condition in all of its many facets and a serious desire to learn and to grow through my own therapy and further reading and training. My training provided me with a professional identity and ethics to use to guide my career.

As I approach retirement and think of those entering the field at this point, I think about what I want in a helper. I want someone who will be a partner with me in my treatment, not an expert who will “treat me.” I want someone who will have a deep respect for my opinion and for me. I want someone with both a breadth of knowledge and a deep sense of humility in the face of what we do not know. I want someone who is open to exploring options and who does not dismiss out of hand new or alternative treatments. I want someone with a willingness to acknowledge limits and admit mistakes. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I want someone with a deep and abiding faith in the human capacity to heal. ❧

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