

How do you know you're getting good therapy?

In the wake of Government plans to regulate therapy and promote good practice, **Dr Cecilia d'Felice** explores how you can tell if the therapy you're getting is good and what to do to make sure

When meeting with a therapist for the first time, many people feel anxious and overwhelmed, uncertain as to what therapy will hold for them. It is natural to want to feel understood, contained and cared for. Any therapy that does not acknowledge these basic human needs is more damaging than therapeutic.

With the majority of patients already anxious at the start of therapy, it begs the question why raise their anxiety further?

Joe Griffin and Ivan Tyrrell in their book *Human Givens: A new approach to emotional health and clear thinking* outline a useful list of what you should expect from an effective counsellor, psychotherapist or psychologist. For a lot of us, with limited experience of therapy, it can be difficult to know whether the therapy we're getting is good or not.

Clear and helpful

The aims of therapy should always be made clear from the outset. A therapist should use practices based on up-to-date, scientifically researched techniques which have shown effective results in the treatment of psychological distress. This includes the therapist's knowledge and understanding of depression and anxiety disorders, and the ability to help immediately with practical solutions to the problems faced by the people who come to see them. Therapists should be prepared to give advice if needed or asked for, something that traditional psychotherapy has often resisted. There are therapists who, through specific schools of training, adhere



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to a model of psychotherapy that is cold and uses silence excessively. Many people find this approach frightening, confusing and anti-therapeutic and there is no current evidence base that this form of therapy is effective.

Griffin and Tyrrell feel that jargon, psychobabble or an expectation that therapy should be 'painful' is unnecessary. Therapy should always feel therapeutic and helpful, never painful or confusing and if issues arise that are emotionally difficult, the therapist should be supportive and containing throughout. Dwelling unduly on past events is also considered unhelpful and cognitive research shows that constantly revisiting past negative events is not an effective approach to making changes in the present.

Good practitioners will help you to develop social skills so that you can get your needs met by greater intimacy, friendship, closeness and connection with the people around you. They will encourage you to explore and develop your own resources which are often present but perhaps lying dormant, suppressed by the symptoms of depression or anxiety that may have been troubling you. Good therapists will give you practical skills and techniques to help you relax, think about your problems constructively from alternative perspectives and increase your self-confidence and autonomy. I would also add that a good therapist will always ask for feedback at the start and end of each session, reviewing how the past week has been, what changes have been made or noticed

and to make sure that at the end of the session you feel empowered with new insights or skills to take yourself forward to the next level of your personal development.

Working Together

A good therapist should welcome feedback. Without it, a collaborative therapeutic alliance where you both work together to help you feel better, cannot be fully formed. You should always feel free to say that things are not improving or that you do not understand a particular technique or are finding therapy difficult. In this way these issues can be made transparent and addressed, allowing for breakthroughs in therapy leading to deeper levels of personal understanding.

If you are having therapy and your therapist does not follow these simple guidelines, ask them in your next session what methods they are using and why. Service users have

the right to ask questions of their health care professionals and this should be true for psychotherapists, counsellors and psychologists. A good therapist will welcome a discussion of how the therapy is progressing and not feel attacked or defensive when challenged. If you still feel that your therapist is not working effectively with you and that they are not willing to be clear about the methods they are using, ask to meet with a senior member of staff to discuss your concerns. Patients, clients and service users are entitled to an autonomous voice in therapy, secure in the knowledge they are being given the best possible treatment, protected by good practice guidelines. Without this, effective therapy simply is not possible. ●

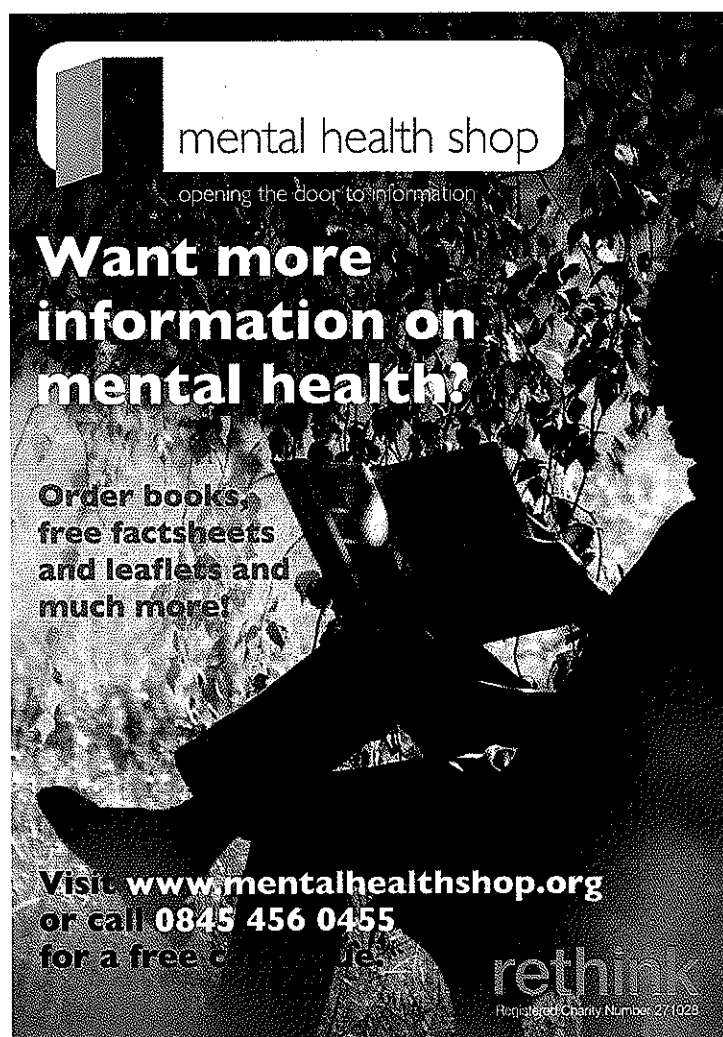
Human Givens: A new approach to emotional health and clear thinking by Joe Griffin and Ivan Tyrrell is published by H G Publishing.

Cecilia d'Felice is an award winning clinical psychologist and regular psychological expert on national TV and Radio.

Cecilia specialises in all aspects of adult mental health and relationships, working for the NHS and in private practice. She is a columnist for *Psychologies* magazine and wrote a weekly column for the *Independent* on Sunday called 'How to be Happy'.

This autumn, Cecilia will be appearing on Channel 5's post-watershed 'Sex – How to do everything', Channel 4's pre-watershed 'Sex Education' and 'Best Friend Rehab' for Channel 5/Fiver.

She is writing her first non-fiction book – a synthesis of memoir and therapy – to be published by Orion in January 2010. She won the Mind Journalist of the Year award in 2007.



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