Seeking Professional Help with a Personal Issue

There are times in everyone's life when personal problems challenge us to increase our resolve and improve our coping strategies. Occasionally our coping mechanisms and the strategies we've become accustomed to relying on are not enough. How do you know when professional help is necessary?

A good rule of thumb is to look at how intensely a problem is affecting you or a loved one and how long it has lasted. If the difficulty is causing you stress or interfering with work, relationships, or other aspects of life, it is wise to seek help.

Common Reasons to Seek Help

Some common reasons for seeking the support and guidance of a professional counsellor or therapist can include the health issues listed below, questions of a personal or spiritual nature, and for help with personal or spousal relationships.

Many people benefit from professional input with issues that are interfering with their well-being, such as:

- Insomnia or problems falling asleep. Waking throughout the night and/or early awakening.
- Eating habits that involve binging, purging, or drastic attitudes towards diet.
- Prolonged loss of interest in hobbies or activities that once were a source of pleasure and enjoyment.
- Difficulty concentrating or focusing for extended periods.
- Spending extended periods of time obsessing over challenges or obstacles at hand.
- Feeling that you are lacking skills such as relaxation, time management or stress management, which are key to well-being.
- Feelings of depression, fatigue or unusual anxiety that just won't go away.
- Physical symptoms that persist in spite of medical intervention (e.g., headaches, stomach cramps, chronic pain, nausea or dizziness, lack of energy/lethargy, dramatic weight loss or gain, vomiting).

For others, questions about yourself or the big picture of your life can require the help of a profession to help make sense of things in a way that works for you and can allow you to get on with a meaningful and fulfilling life. These types of issues can include:

- Pressures and stresses that seem beyond your ability to cope.
- The process of making decisions prompts feelings of panic, despair or dread.
- When you are feeling a lack of purpose or meaning in your life.
- Unexplained anger and irritability.
- Not achieving your potential at work or find it difficult to keep a job.
- Uncertainty about career or life direction.
- The realization that you don't communicate well in relationships or feel the need to be more assertive or less aggressive than you are.
- Problems with those you live with are resulting in emotional, physical, or sexual abuse.
- Suspicion that you or someone close may be abusing alcohol or drugs.

Seeking Help for Your Relationship

Is your relationship different than you want it to be? Are you having trouble understanding what your partner wants from you? Is your relationship a source of continual stress or contradictory to your personal values? Do you miss the rapport or harmony you used to share with your partner? Are you struggling with loneliness even though you are with someone?

If you answered "yes" to any of those questions, you may be dealing with relationship issues, which could be addressed with the support of a professional counsellor or therapist.

If you or someone you care for is experiencing personal or relationship concerns, the most important thing to do is get an appropriate assessment. The following people or services can provide assessments, treatments or referrals:

- Your family doctor
- Other mental health specialists such as counsellors, social workers, psychiatrists, or psychologists
- Community mental health centres
- Hospital emergency rooms, psychiatry departments and outpatient clinics
- University or medical school-affiliated programs

If you're unsure of how to go about contacting any of these services, you can consult the local Yellow Pages, or the Internet using key words such as "mental health" "social services," or "crisis intervention." The College of Physicians and Surgeons, Canadian Psychological Association, and Provincial Psychological Association can also assist you.

It can be intimidating to seek outside help for what are very personal issues. Remember that professionals in these areas are highly trained, discreet and sensitive to these difficulties. Don’t put your happiness at risk any longer than necessary. For more on choosing a professional to help you see the second part of this article series "What Help to Seek" for more ideas.