

HOW TO SELECT A LIFE COACH, MENTOR OR THERAPIST

by Todd Collins Logan, Integral Lifework Coach

As a general guideline, your best option for any kind of coaching, mentoring or counseling is someone with a depth of experience in many different techniques and approaches. This is strongly emphasized in Integral Lifework, and is true for many other holistic practices as well. Also, it is a good idea to find someone who is a member of one or more professional organizations with ethics standards, and who has affiliations and accountability within their field. Even for alternative therapies, a coach, mentor or therapist should have a support system and network of peers, and this is a clear advantage for you as a consumer. However, probably the best way to find a competent practitioner is through a referral from a friend or acquaintance who has used this person's services, and whose opinion you trust. Of course, we all respond differently to different approaches and personalities, so it is always a good idea to "shop around" for someone best suited to your needs.

PREPARATION & INTERVIEW

Before you begin shopping for your coach, mentor or therapist, it may be helpful to develop a clear idea of what you want to get out of your experience. Try making a list of "I want to..." statements that express some specific goals and detailed results you would like to aim for. For example:

- "I want to have more mutually nourishing relationships."
- "I want to have more fun in my life and get out of this funk I'm in."
- "I want to increase my energy and have better overall health."
- "I want to reduce my level of anxiety when I am in large groups of people."
- "I want to mend my relationship with my parents."
- "I want to clarify my purpose and make a positive difference in the world."
- "I want to learn how to avoid arguing or feeling defensive with people."

And so on. It would also be useful to prioritize this kind of list for yourself – and with your practitioner – so that you both know what things to focus on first. After a few sessions you can revisit the list to see how your experience matches up with your goals.

You should also try to narrow the field by finding someone with appropriate training and experience for your needs, and with whom you feel personally comfortable. A quick phone call should discover what you need to know to set up an initial appointment. For instance, you could ask them:

1. What is their background, and how diverse is their experience?
2. What kind of training have they received, and what is their primary focus?
3. How long have they been practicing in your area? Will they be staying here for at least the next year or two?
4. How long do their clients usually keep coming back to them? How many sessions do they average per client?
5. Do they have experience and expertise in your specific area of concern or interest? (i.e. improving communication, patient advocacy, resolving conflict, exercise strategies, dietary suggestions, clarifying life goals, spiritual guidance, intimacy issues, resolving anger, transforming fears or anxieties, etc.)
6. How will they determine if integral practice will help you with your needs?

Once you feel confident in their experience and approach, you should set up an initial appointment. Let them know ahead of time that you are “just shopping around,” and may have additional questions for them during your first visit. These can be a little more personal. For instance:

1. Why did they become a coach, therapist or mentor?
2. How happy are they themselves with their life right now? Why or why not?
3. What things are most important to them in their relationship with a client?

Share whatever is on your mind with them, and see how they respond to you. Once you are comfortable with their answers, go over your “I want to...” list with them, and see what kinds of questions and insights they have for you, and what approaches they would propose moving forward.

POST-INTERVIEW ASSESSMENT

Having good rapport with your practitioner is very important, especially as you establish openness, collaboration and trust. However, it is less important that you like each other enough to become friends. This is a professional relationship where you are equals in the healing and growth process, offering each other mutual respect and appreciation. A therapist should also clearly demonstrate their professionalism in your first meeting. For instance, if they seem flirtatious or rush into physical contact with you (hugs, repeated touching, etc.), that is probably inappropriate. If they seem agitated, inattentive or overconfident, share your observation with them and see how they react. Afterwards, reflect on your experience and decide whether this is a good match:

- How did they answer your questions? Did you feel they were honest?
- Did they seem condescending or patronizing towards you, or were they respectful and caring?
- Did they ask questions that helped you clarify your own priorities?
- Did they seem to understand your concerns?
- Did they seem negative or cynical, or were they joyful and optimistic?
- Did they seem tired and depressed, or warm and genuine?
- When you asked them how happy they are in life, did they seem sincere and enthusiastic, or become defensive and impatient?
- Were they authentically interested in you, or were they more interested in promoting their own capabilities and experience?
- Were they willing to be flexible and open? For instance, how did they respond, overall, to the idea of answering so many questions from you?

And finally, it is especially useful to listen to your intuition. What was your impression of this person within the first few moments of meeting them? Did it change significantly after a few minutes? If you have the time and resources to do so, talk to at least two or three different practitioners before deciding whom you would like to begin with. In my practice, I encourage people to refine and clarify their thoughts in moments of quiet solitude before deciding anything important. Then, once you have made a decision, be committed to your own well-being and don't give up when the sessions or homework become challenging for you. Integral Lifework and other integral approaches offer powerful, life-changing experiences. Make sure you feel confident in the person you are working with, but also be willing to take risks. If you are anxious or worried about personal issues and growth, that is natural. Eventually, a skilled coach, mentor or therapist can help you turn this into excitement and positive anticipation.

For more information on general ethics and standards of practice, try the following sites:

http://aamft.org/iMIS15/AAMFT/Content/Legal_Ethics/Code_of_Ethics.aspx

and

<http://www.apa.org/ethics/code/index.aspx>