

Picking the Best Psychologist for You

The government of Saskatchewan declared February “psychology month” in recognition of the profession’s contribution to the well-being of its citizens. According to Darcia Evans, chair of the Saskatchewan Advocacy Committee representing two professional associations in the province, psychologists aim to work with people of all ages and cultures conducting psychological assessments, counselling and preparing therapeutic plans. The range of issues addressed by psychologists includes developmental, learning and behaviour problems, relationship issues, sexuality, family counselling, lifestyle issues, vocational counselling, addictions, depression, mental illnesses, chronic pain, rehabilitation from disease or accidents, and court consultations. No one psychologist can be equally competent in all areas forcing specialization. Some areas of practise include:

School Psychology - the application of knowledge about human behaviour and development to the understanding of the social, emotional and learning needs of students, and the creation of learning environments that facilitate learning and mental health.

Counselling Psychology - the fostering and improving of normal human functioning by helping people solve problems, make decisions and cope with stresses of everyday life.

Clinical Psychology - the application of knowledge about human behaviour to the assessment, diagnosis and/or treatment of individuals with disorders of behaviour, emotions and thought.

Health Psychology - the application of psychological knowledge and skills to the promotion and maintenance of health, the prevention and treatment of illness, and the identification of determinants of health and illness.

Forensic/Correctional Psychology - the application of knowledge about human behaviour to the understanding, assessment, diagnosis and/or treatment of individuals within the context of criminal and/or legal matters.

Industrial/Organizational Psychology - understanding the behaviour of individuals and organizations in the workplace; helping individuals pursue meaningful and enriching work; and, assisting organizations in the effective management of their human resources.

Psychologists working in the north need to be generalists. Our small population base means that we will have too few professionals to allow for a high degree of specialization. Northern psychologists need to be able to recognize when client needs are beyond their current levels of competence and must be able to connect with southern specialists with whom they may work collaboratively or to whom they may refer.

To be effective in the north, psychologists also need a grounding in cross-cultural assessment and treatment. Since the scientific practice of psychology grew out of European traditions, some aboriginal people have viewed it with suspicion. If psychology were to promote just one way of being then it would be assimilationist. In fact, there are many culturally different ways to satisfy

our human needs for productivity, relating and belonging, and culturally sensitive psychologists will be open to such alternatives. Well-intentioned psychologists may unwittingly promote assimilation by failing to recognize bias built into measures of ability or personality normed for majority populations. Behaviors that might indicate an abnormality in a middle-class white context may be normal in other cultural contexts. Northern psychologists need to be sensitive to alternative explanations that are culturally appropriate.

When looking for a psychologist, the first thing you will want to do is ask about his or her areas of competence. Make sure that those areas match your needs. Then you will want to explore with the psychologist various options for assessment, counselling or therapy and ensure that the psychologist's methods match your expectations. Finally, if relevant, ask the psychologist about his understanding of cross-cultural issues. Gain your own "feel" of the psychologist and if it does not feel like a good fit, shop around. Different psychologists have different personalities and approaches. Find the one that best meets your needs and with whom you can best relate.