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CONTENTS

- SECRET #1: Focus on the Good—Not the Perfect—in Yourself and Your Kids 1
- SECRET #2: Discipline out of Love and Allow Kids to Learn from the Consequences 29
- SECRET #3: Consider the Impact of Birth Order on Behavior 59
- SECRET #4: Take Part in Your Kids' Education 95
- SECRET #5: Choose a School for Its True Merits, Not Prestige 127
- SECRET #6: Start Early to Shape Your Kids' Personalities 153
- SECRET #7: Help Kids Create Good Memories and Heal Bad Ones 191
- SECRET #8: Teach Kids to Take Responsibility for Their Own Actions 213
- SECRET #9: Be Straightforward with Your Kids—Don't Give In to Game-Playing 245
- SECRET #10: Remember That You Were Once a Teenager Too! 267
- Appendix I: A Child's Ten Commandments 297*
- Appendix II: A Teenager's Ten Commandments 299*
- Appendix III: Finding Professional Help 301*

Secret #1

Focus on the Good—
Not the Perfect—
in Yourself and Your Kids

This is a book written *for* parents *by* a parent of five *great* kids. Does that mean I'm a *great* parent?

No. Not really. But then, it doesn't take great parents to turn out great kids. All it takes is *good* parents—like you.

Good, Not Perfect

Now I realize many parents live in constant fear that they're going to do something to mess up their children. They're afraid that one mistake, and bam—their child will join the skinheads or the goths. But that's not the way it works.

A *good* parent is, among other things, one

who allows himself a margin of error. He realizes there is forgiveness and redemption, even if he occasionally blows it big-time. There have been times when I've failed to "practice what I preach" with regard to my own children. Sometimes I've turned my back on all the things I know and let my emotions and impulses lead me. Yet I've always returned to the principles contained within this book, with fantastic results. Three of my kids are beyond college age now, and the other two are rapidly heading in that direction. I'm thankful to say that all my kids have turned out great—and so can yours.

Unfortunately, though, many parents do make *constant* and *repeated* errors in parenting, with tragic results. Such was the case with a young man named John. It was many years ago, but I remember it as if it happened last week.

The clock read 10:30 P.M. when the phone rang. *Who could be calling at this time of the night?* I thought to myself. The businesslike voice on the other end of the line brought heartbreaking news. John, one of my students at the University of Arizona, had committed

suicide. I took the necessary information from the police officer, made the calls that needed to be made, and tried to settle myself back to sleep.

I tossed and turned. At 1:45 A.M. I was still awake, staring into the dark. I kept asking myself why a twenty-two-year-old man would take his own life, just before Christmas. Apparently it wasn't very important to be alive Christmas morning. When I received the report from the police department the next day, I had the opportunity to review the suicide note John had left. "I just couldn't measure up to the standards of this world. Perhaps in the next world I can do better. I'm sorry. John."

At that very moment, I knew John was a "defeated perfectionist." No matter how hard he tried, no matter what he did, somehow he always fell short of what he thought he was supposed to be.

I wanted to see for myself how badly John had failed to "measure up to the standards of this world," so I went to the registrar's office and looked through the records. To my

surprise, I discovered he was a graduating senior in a scientific field. In four years of university work, he had never received a grade lower than an A. He was about to graduate *summa cum laude*, yet he perceived himself as a failure.

Dealing with John's death was the saddest time I went through during my tenure as assistant dean of students at the university—a position that otherwise gave me a great deal of joy and satisfaction. Why would someone who had so much to offer the world, so much to live for, choose to throw his life away?

I realize questions like that have been asked again and again throughout history and that there are no easy answers. At the same time, I have come to understand there are thousands of other people following in John's footsteps. They live with the pain of constant defeat and failure. They measure up to everybody's standards but their own.

By now you may be wondering, "But what part do parents play in a scenario such as this?" Sadly, they often play a major role in the underlying cause for such behavior.

There's no question about it—perfectionists are created, not born. You have to learn to be perfectionistic. How does this happen?

First of all, children learn perfectionism through trial and error when they are very young. If in a given family one child is going to be perfectionistic, chances are good he or she will be the firstborn. Why? I will discuss the firstborn child in greater detail in chapter 3, but it is sufficient to say at this point that the firstborn often bears the brunt of Mom and Dad's unfulfilled wishes and dreams.

Most parents “over-parent” with the first child. They set expectations much too high and discipline much more strictly than with later-born children. They also call on the firstborn to provide more assistance at home and to do exceptionally well at school. How often have you observed something like this?

Little Kristen, age three, sees Mommy doing housework and anxiously asks what she can do to help. Mommy says, “Well, honey, right now Mommy's very busy. Maybe later you can help.”

Kristin whines and cries because she wants

to help right now. Mommy relents and says, “Okay, Kristin, why don’t you make your bed for me?” The little girl, delighted she can be Mommy’s helper, runs to her room and gives it her best effort. Admittedly, it doesn’t look a whole lot better than it did before, but she’s proud of it anyway.

Mommy comes into the room at this point and says, “Oh, Kristin, thank you for helping me. What a good girl you are.”

But even as she’s saying all these “right” things, she’s *doing* the “wrong” things by smoothing out the wrinkles, fluffing the pillow, and basically redoing everything Kristin just tried to do. The little girl hears her mother’s complimentary words, but she also sees what’s happening. She’s no dummy. Even a three-year-old gets the message, “What you did wasn’t good enough.” How much better it would have been for Mommy to leave the bed exactly the way her little girl made it.

In this situation, Mom doesn’t have a clue she’s making her little girl feel bad. It wasn’t her intention to blow out little Kristin’s candle. Yet the expression on her daughter’s face says

that's exactly what has happened. The little girl has been left totally defeated by her mother's superior ability. It's easy to see where the defeatist rationale can come into Kristin's life: "What's the use of even trying? Mommy can do it so much better than I can." It's essential for parents to be able to *accept a child's effort*, no matter what kind of task is involved.

The Dark Side of Perfect

Now perfection per se isn't bad. My sister's father-in-law is a skilled craftsman, a cabinet-maker. I've had the opportunity to see his work in churches and homes, and it is probably as close to perfect as you could find. Many craftsmen with this kind of skill and God-given talent strive to do an excellent job. They can stand back, look at a particular project, and say, "That has been a lot of work, but I've enjoyed it. It's just the way I wanted it to turn out." I can live with that kind of perfection—and so can anyone else.

An obsession with perfection, however, can lead to a tragedy I'm seeing more and more in my private psychological practice: the defeated

perfectionist. This person cannot accept what he does, regardless of how well he does it, and has a need to put himself down.

A craftsman who is a defeated perfectionist is never satisfied with what he has done. He may be forced by a deadline to finish a job, but even then he looks at it and says, "If only I could have kept working at it for another year or two, then I would have been able to get it the way I *really* wanted it."

Unfortunately, I frequently see this kind of perfectionism in very young children. I have had occasion to observe as well as consult in several preschools and have seen this pattern manifest itself in students as young as three or four years of age.

For example, suppose the teacher asks little Mary, age three and a half, to cut out three circles for the bulletin board. After two seemingly successful attempts, Mary rips the circles to shreds and runs out of the room. The concerned teacher follows her and asks, "Mary what's wrong? Your circles were so pretty. Why did you tear them up?"

"No," Mary sobs, "they weren't any good."

Nothing I do is any good. Ask Tommy to cut out the circles.”

Teacher and Mary return to the classroom. Teacher turns to Tommy and asks him to cut out the circles and place them on the bulletin board, which he promptly does. His circles aren't any better than Mary's. They may even be a little lopsided. But Mary doesn't see that. She is not making a realistic comparison of her circles with Tommy's. She is only demonstrating the way she feels inside—that nothing she does will ever be good enough. And so, as Tommy's circles are placed on the bulletin board, little Mary chalks up another defeat in her young life.

Children, as well as adults, often set standards so unreasonably high that they doom themselves to failure, reinforcing their perception that they are no good.

Another example: Teacher gathers her twelve preschoolers in a circle to play a game of Duck Duck Goose. Most of the children clap their hands and jump with glee. “Who's going to be the goose?” one shouts. “Me! Me!” says another. “No, me!” another yells.

Timmy, age four, takes a step backward,

and then another. Teacher notices Timmy withdrawing, goes over to him, and encourages him to be a part of the game.

“Why don’t you want to play?” she asks. Timmy just shrugs his shoulders. “Won’t you please come and join us?” He shakes his head.

This may be just one of many instances in which young Timmy begins to develop a means of protecting himself from the fear of making a mistake, of doing or saying the wrong thing, of being embarrassed. Young children like Timmy—as well as adults—are quite capable of creating defense mechanisms to protect themselves from what they see as the overwhelming pain of being wrong or making a mistake. This can be seen in people who refuse to become involved and whose rationale might be, “Well, I can’t be criticized for failing if I don’t try.” It can also be seen in those who delay starting tasks or who start so many different tasks they never finish any of them.

I believe many of the children in special education classes in schools across our country are perfectionists who have such a great fear of failing that they don’t try at all. The inability of

the school system to recognize and deal with this problem has led to the successive labeling and further failure of these young people, resulting in a great loss of human potential.

Is There a Defeated Perfectionist in Your Family?

I like to ask parents whether their children keep their bedrooms clean. The answer to that question can help determine whether or not there are indications suggesting a strong need to be perfect.

I'm not talking about keeping the room neat and clean in a general way. Don't think that your child is a defeated perfectionist just because there aren't mushrooms growing on his floor or because he actually makes the bed each morning.

Rather, I'm talking about a child who is fastidious to a fault. If your child keeps his room looking as neat as your grandmother's parlor, there may be a problem. Children aren't supposed to be neat. That's not the way God designed them!

If you see patterns in one of your children's

behaviors that make you think he may be a defeated perfectionist or have strong tendencies in that direction, don't despair. That behavior can be changed. Being aware of it is the key.

If you want to know if your actions might be contributing toward the making of a defeated perfectionist, ask yourself the following questions:

Suppose your son is setting the table for dinner. He puts the knives and spoons on the left-hand side of the plate and the forks on the right-hand side. Would you:

- Go in and switch the silverware around so everything is where it is supposed to be?
- Tell your child he made a mistake and explain how to set the table properly?
- Thank him for setting the table, leave things the way they are, and figure it really doesn't matter which side of the plate the silverware is on anyway?

Your daughter proudly invites you to come and see how she has cleaned her room. You go

into her room and are surprised to see she has really done a pretty good job. You notice, however, that she has failed miserably in her attempt to shine the mirror. Would you:

- Walk over and begin wiping the smudges from the mirror?
- Tell your daughter she did a good job except for the mirror, and show her the proper way to use a bottle of Windex?
- Thank her for doing such a good job and leave it the way it is?

Honestly, how would you handle those two situations?

Now I know if you pride yourself on setting a nice table or keeping your home spotless, it's not easy to leave things even a little messy. And I'm not talking just to the women either. Just as many fathers are guilty of "redoing" things for their children, thus damaging their children's self-esteem.

The best choice in each of these situations is to leave things the way they are and thank the child for the effort expended. Admittedly,

if the child who set the table is fourteen years old and you've told him 714 times that the knives and spoons go on the right and the forks go on the left, then you'd certainly be right to correct him. And if the daughter is a teenager who gave her room a halfhearted effort, then, yes, point out that she didn't do the job properly and ask her to try a little harder.

But if we are talking about children who honestly did the best they could, then by all means compliment them. Let them feel the satisfaction of a job well done. You know how good you feel when you've done something and know you've done it well. Your child needs and deserves to experience that same good feeling.

This is not to say that we as parents shouldn't teach our children to improve. Rather, it's all in how we approach it. Timing is crucial.

For example, suppose little Brewster calls you in to see how well he has set the table, and it looks like the aftermath of a cyclone. I suggest you make the most of it, but make a mental note to teach him, later on, the proper way to do

it. The only stipulation is that your teaching session be far enough from his accomplishment that he doesn't feel put down or scolded for doing it wrong. In other words, if immediately after dinner you take him aside and show him the proper way to set the table, he is going to get the idea you didn't like the way he did it tonight. He will become discouraged.

If Mary Louise has streaked her mirror with glass cleaner, it might be a good idea to have her assist you with some cleaning in a week or two. Then you can share your "secrets" on how to get mirrors and windows extra-shiny. That way you will increase your child's self-esteem instead of diminishing it and will enhance her abilities as well.

I am only using making the bed, setting the table, and cleaning the room as examples because it is easy to illustrate in these situations how a child's self-esteem might be damaged. In reality, there are countless ways well-meaning mothers and fathers hurt their children without realizing it. When a child is doing his best to please you, well, what more could you ask of him?

I was conducting a workshop at a rather large church when a young father asked me if he should allow his daughter to hang ornaments on the family Christmas tree. I shrugged and asked what was wrong with that.

“Well,” he said, “I’m a perfectionistic person. I wondered if I should let her decorate the tree and then after she goes to sleep change the decorations so they are perfect, or not let her help at all?”

I could hardly believe what I was hearing, and everyone else in the large auditorium howled with laughter. They thought the question was hilarious. But Dad wasn’t laughing. He wasn’t even smiling. He was perfectly serious, and I felt very sorry for his little girl. I told him so, but I doubt very much if one word from me was going to change his behavior. This kind of perfectionism is destructive to children and often a main contributor to unhappiness in adult life.

Focus on What’s Good

What do you see first when your child tries to clean his room? Do you see the way he

straightened the far corner, or do you look instead at the mess he left in the near corner? In other words, are you quicker to focus on the positive or the negative?

I'm afraid our children receive far too many negative messages. For example, little Johnny completes a 100-word spelling test in school. When he gets it back he sees "minus 8" at the top of the page, circled in red. Wouldn't it be just as easy to give him a "plus 92" instead?

If you admit you're often quick to see the negative, I urge you to make a commitment to look for the positive first. There will always be something you can compliment.

Any business person who has read books or taken courses on how to manage people knows the technique of "sandwich criticism"—presenting criticism with compliments on either side.

For example:

1. Johnson, I really appreciate the job you did on the Krelman contract. Great effort.
2. Unfortunately, this Smedlap deal is going to need a little bit more work. I think

there may be a problem with some of these figures. Please take another look at it.

3. Thanks for your effort. And again, you're doing a really good job.

In this situation, the employee has been asked to do something over, but he has also been given two pats on the back. He doesn't feel discouraged and think, "Oh, they really think I blew it." Instead, he feels his work is appreciated, even though he knows he has to correct some mistakes on the Smedlap deal. This sort of management style is very effective in the office, and it translates easily into parent-child relationships as well.

It is also helpful to stay out of situations where parents are required to be judge and jury, evaluating their children's efforts needlessly. I am often asked, "What do you do when a child brings home a report card with a string of As?"

I usually comment with a response like, "It's good to see, Sally, that you enjoy learning." That's appropriate because it puts the ef-

fort right on the child's shoulders and recognizes that the child put a lot of work into all those As. And, it gets me out of a situation where I'm saying, "My, you're a good girl because you got As."

In other words, don't leave the child thinking you are proud of him only because of what he has done, or that you are displeased with him because his effort has not measured up. Your message to your children must always be one of unconditional love. You love them because they are your children, plain and simple, and that's what they need to know.

Keys to Healthy Growth

1. Always assign children tasks within their ability.

It is never good to give a child a task he or she obviously can't accomplish. Some parents choose this strategy to "motivate" their children, but it often produces discouragement instead. On the other hand, not giving a child any regular responsibilities within the home is just as destructive because it can breed irresponsibility.

2. Look for the positive.

We've already touched upon this. What I want to tell you now, however, is that if you seem to be locked into a power struggle with your child, experiencing one needless hassle after another, then it's time to try to communicate in a positive fashion. For example, "Hey, we can't go on like this forever—why don't we bury the hatchet? Why don't we stop digging up old bones and try to start anew?" Sometimes that's the only approach that will work. Don't be afraid to try making a fresh, positive start.

3. Discipline instead of punish.

I've already mentioned the importance of sandwiching criticism with compliments. It's also vital to remember that when you have to criticize your child for some reason, the criticism must be aimed at the act and never at the child himself. There is a great deal of difference between discipline and punishment. Discipline zeros in on the act. It is possible to be really angry at the act and yet still love the child. Punishment, on the other hand, fo-

cuses on the child. Too many children walk away with the feeling they are being singled out and punished unnecessarily.

In today's society there are too many parents "punishing" their children, and too many children turning around and doing their best to "punish" their parents. It doesn't get anybody anywhere good. Here are a few of the differences between discipline and punishment.

- Punishment grows out of a desire for revenge; the aim of discipline is to teach and train.
- Punishment may be applied arbitrarily—"because I said so, that's why." Discipline is always reasonable and explained.
- Punishment is something parents do to their children; discipline should be seen as a natural consequence of a disobedient act.
- As I said, punishment takes aim at the child, but discipline takes aim at the act the child committed.

4. Help children learn from their mistakes.

When your children make mistakes—as they will—be practical and try to have a sense of

humor. When your child spills milk at the dinner table, give him a rag to clean it up, not a lecture. Lecturing him about something he didn't mean to do when he feels bad enough already is counterproductive. Your first instinct may be to "fly off the handle," but if you'll take a deep breath or count to ten before reacting, you'll deal with it much better. The old proverb tells the truth when it says there is no use crying over spilled milk. There's no reason to yell about it either! Perfectionists take such things much too seriously.

5. Avoid comparisons.

Let each child know he or she has an individual, special place in your heart. Don't compare your children by saying things like, "Why can't you be more like your sister?" or "Your brother never brought home grades this bad."

Very often, I find that parents compare their children without meaning to or even realizing what they're doing. It works this way: Three-year-old Gertrude wants to show her parents she has learned how to do a somersault. She's

thrilled until she hears Daddy turn to Mommy and say, “Remember when Gretchen did this?” Gertrude gets the message that what she has just done was already done by her bigger sister, who can do things so much better than she can anyway. Gertrude thought she had learned something special, but now she feels like it was no big deal.

You can see the subtle kind of put-downs we parents may engage in without realizing it. That’s one of the reasons so much of our children’s behavior puzzles us. We wonder what caused it, not realizing that we are responsible.

How Ragú Changed a Life

Above all, parents need to curb their own perfectionistic tendencies. Let children behave as children, and don’t expect them to be little adults. They aren’t. In fact, I believe there are fewer things sadder than a child who is afraid to or doesn’t know how to act like a child.

When I think of perfection, I frequently think of a couple I worked with a few years ago—two of the most contrasting personalities I have dealt with. Karin, thirty-six, was

very much a perfectionist and a supermother of six children. With all those ankle-biters running around the house competing for her time, she was still able to keep her home in perfect order. In fact everything about her, including her children, was as nearly perfect as could be. Every time I saw her, she looked like she could have stepped right off the cover of *Glamour* magazine.

Jack, on the other hand, looked more like he had stepped off the cover of *Outdoor Life*. He could have passed as a shepherd without much difficulty.

The marriage between these two was very competitive. Karin would push forward, and Jack would pull back or retreat. I had a very difficult time with this young couple, getting them to see they were in needless competition, and that the competition had to stop if their marriage was going to make it.

I spent a great deal of time in individual therapy with Karin, who eventually began to see her life had been a series of roadblocks—roadblocks she had put before herself that pretty much ensured she would fail. She had

expectations and goals for her husband that were almost unattainable, but they provided her with the opportunity to say, “Jack, you’ve fallen short. You don’t measure up. You’re no good, and I don’t like it.”

We discussed the fact that even beautiful cathedrals were built one brick at a time. Karin had to start somewhere when it came to changing a lifestyle totally rooted in perfectionism. It was unrealistic to expect her to change everything overnight, but I knew we could get to where we wanted to be if we could make one small change after another.

Karin’s perfectionistic attitude had even affected her relationship with God. She was a fine Christian woman, but she wanted her relationship with God to be perfect. Because there aren’t many things that *are* perfect, she felt defeated in her spiritual life. God, in essence, wasn’t big enough to love her or to forgive her for her transgressions.

Finally, she made the necessary commitment to begin to change things in her life. She had told me on an earlier occasion that whenever she made a cake for her family, she would

always make it from scratch. When she had people over for dinner, everything had to be color-coordinated. She would go so far as to make sure the kids' clothing matched the napkins and candlesticks. She would even "iron" the davenport. The clear vinyl runner, which usually greeted people at the door, was removed only for these special occasions, when people actually were allowed to walk on the carpet.

Believe it or not, the breakthrough that saved Karin's marriage came in a bottle she bought at her local grocery store. No . . . it wasn't some miracle elixir. It was spaghetti sauce.

Karin told me one evening with a sigh of relief, "Doctor Lemman, my life changed when I reached for the Ragú." You see, previous to this time she made her spaghetti sauce from scratch—the same way she did everything else in her "perfect" kitchen. She had imposed such high standards for herself that the standards not only frustrated her, but they also led to inevitable failure. It wasn't easy to use store-bought sauce, but she did. That one

act began a process that changed her life for the better.

To top it off, guess what? Her kids and husband like the Ragú spaghetti sauce even better than her own!

Exercises

I. Arrange for a “family fun confession,” in which all members of the family agree to share some of their most embarrassing moments. No deep dark secrets need to be shared, but try to get everyone to have a good time talking about some of the “goofs” they’ve made in life. This lets your children know that a) everyone makes mistakes; b) it’s all right to fail every once in a while; and c) you can learn to laugh at your mistakes.

II. During the next week, stop and make a note of every time you catch yourself interacting with your child(ren) in a negative way that says, “You don’t measure up to my expectations.” Resolve to be less and less negative and more and more positive, even in cases where discipline or criticism is required.

III. Get a Bible story book or a children's Bible and study with your child the story of the apostle Peter, zeroing in on all the ways he failed: He tried to walk on water and sank; he resorted to physical violence in the Garden of Gethsemane; he denied three times that he knew Christ. And yet he became one of the greatest of all Bible heroes. Talk about the fact that Peter's many failures did not hold him back. Can you think of other "heroes" who have failed at some point in their lives? For example, Thomas Edison was considered to be "a dunce" when he was a child. Stress the fact that nobody's perfect.

APPENDIX I

A Child's Ten Commandments

1. My hands are small, so please don't expect perfection when I make a bed, draw a picture, or throw a ball. My legs are short; please slow down so I can keep up with you.
2. My eyes have not seen the world as yours have, so please let me explore safely.
3. Please take the time to explain things to me about this wonderful world, and do so willingly.
4. My feelings are tender, so please be sensitive to my needs. Treat me as you would like to be treated.
5. Please treasure me as God intended you to do, holding me accountable for my actions, giving me guidelines to live by, and disciplining me in a loving manner.
6. Please go easy on the criticism, and

- remember that you can criticize the things I do without criticizing me.
7. Please give me the freedom to make decisions concerning myself, and even to fail, so I can learn from my mistakes.
 8. Please don't do things over for me. That makes me feel my efforts didn't quite measure up to your expectations.
 9. Mom and Dad, show me that you love each other. That's something I need to know.
 10. Don't forget to take me to Sunday school and church regularly. I enjoy learning about God, and I need to know he is my Friend.

APPENDIX II

A Teenager's Ten Commandments

1. Please don't give me everything I say I want. Saying no shows me you care. I appreciate guidelines.
2. Don't treat me as if I were a little kid. Even though you know what's "right," I need to discover some things for myself.
3. Respect my need for privacy. Often I need to be alone to sort things out and daydream.
4. Never say, "In my day . . ." That's an immediate turn off. Besides, the pressures and responsibilities of my world are more complicated than they were when you were my age.
5. I don't pick your friends or clothes; please don't criticize mine. We can disagree and still respect each other's choices.

6. Refrain from always rescuing me; I learn most from my mistakes. Hold me accountable for the decisions I make in life; it's the only way I'll learn to be responsible.
7. Be brave enough to share your disappointments, thoughts, and feelings with me. By the way, I'm never too old to be told I'm loved.
8. Don't talk in volumes. I've had years of good instruction; now trust me with the wisdom you have shared.
9. I respect you when you ask me for forgiveness for a thoughtless deed or word on your part. It proves that neither of us is perfect.
10. Set a good example for me as God intended you to do. I pay more attention to your actions than your words.

APPENDIX III

Finding Professional Help

Throughout this book, I have made many references to seeking professional help when necessary. It may come to the point where you've done everything you can to help your child, and things haven't changed a bit. You've run out of ideas. Don't despair. A good therapist can get through to a child who seems totally out of reach. The question is, how do you find a good therapist?

As a starting point, you need to ask the therapist some questions other than, "How much do you charge?" It used to be that whenever someone called to ask how much I charged for a counseling session, I'd tell him. Usually, he'd say, "Okay, thank you," and hang up. If he thought my rates were too expensive, I might never hear from him again. If he didn't he might make an appointment.

That kind of situation made me feel bad, because you shouldn't shop for a competent therapist the way you might shop for a new pair of pants or a blouse. So now whenever someone calls to ask how much I charge I say, "I'll be happy to answer that question. Before I do, however, I think there are some other things you ought to ask about me. Questions like, 'What kind of a person are you? Are you married? Do you value marriage? Do you have any spiritual values? What is your training? Is there a particular model you follow in your therapy?'"

I realize we live in a money-oriented society and that it might seem wise to shop around for a bargain. But when it comes to therapy, you want to find someone who can genuinely help you, not just someone who's going to give you a discounted rate. Now I'm not necessarily saying that the more you pay, the better help you'll get. Nor am I saying you should look for the therapist with the longest string of initials after his name, signifying all the degrees he has. What matters is the particular skills he or she possesses, along with his or her overall attitude about life.

For example, I have known Christians who have gone to non-Christian therapists and been told, in essence, that their problems related to their belief in God. If they could just get free from those “antiquated” ideas and live the “liberated” life, they would be just fine. I’ve seen those kinds of therapists destroy lives with their ill-conceived suggestions and pseudotherapy. Naturally, no believer would intentionally seek help from a person like that.

I’m not saying the therapist you choose has to be a Christian. But you should know, at least, that he is open to spiritual values and that he is not antagonistic toward those who seek to live the life of faith.

On the other hand, I have known people who went to well-meaning Christian therapists but received no real help because those therapists weren’t equipped to handle the situation. In other words, there has to be more to the therapist you choose than simply the fact he is a Christian. After all, he can be a Christian and still be incompetent in other ways.

So . . . if there comes a time when you decide to seek professional help, please don't be afraid to ask questions before you sign up. If you can't get any answers, move on. And don't worry about asking a "dumb" question. There is no such thing when it comes to something this important.

Look for Someone Who Wants to Get Rid of You

When seeking a professional therapist, above all else, look for someone who will try to get rid of you. In other words, look for someone who is going to deal with you on as short a term as possible. Many counselors and psychologists feel no behavioral change can take place without a long-term commitment—for example, one or two sessions per week for at least a year. I have not found this to be necessary. I believe that by locking a client into long-term therapy, we're saying he cannot handle his responsibilities and decisions in the real world.

I have known of many cases where people have gone to the same counselor for three or

four years, even more, without noticeable improvement. In such cases, you might almost say the patient has become “addicted” to therapy. He needs that session each week to vent his feelings by talking to someone who will listen. However, he isn’t making any headway toward seeing the situation changed once and for all, and that’s what therapy ought to be about.

If you are in doubt, and if a physician or pastor isn’t available to refer you to a professional, call your State Board of Psychologists Examiners or a local chapter of the American Association of Marriage and Family Counselors. They could at least provide you with a list of people who are certified professionals. This in no way certifies that the therapist is right for you, but it does protect you in the sense that all the people listed in the various associations have at least met minimum requirements. In some states, for instance, a person can call himself a counselor without any training or degree whatsoever. All he has to do is rent an office, hang out a shingle offering his counseling services, and he’s in business.