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Introduction

“How do you tell a good therapist from the bad?”

PAT WAS MY LAST PATIENT and arrived late. She was thirty-two, worked as a computer systems analyst, and began crying as soon as I closed the door. Her marriage was crumbling, her boss and young daughter were impossible, and she got a ticket while driving to my office. It hadn't been a good day or week or year for her.

She consulted another therapist* before me, fleeing after twenty-three sessions in his antique filled office. “It shattered me,” she said. “What he did was anti-therapy. He made me worse.” “Why did you wait so long before leaving?” I asked. Pat thought for a moment before answering. “I don't know anything about therapy. How do you tell a good therapist from the bad?”

I treated Pat, then her and her husband together. Later I treated their five year old daughter, who was a delight. Long afterward, Pat's question lingered in my mind: With all the intimidating jargon, how can the ordinary person choose an effective therapist?

Not by going with the largest, most impressive Yellow Pages ad for marketing skill and expense have nothing to do with competence in therapy. Nor does being widely known or belonging to a professional organization. Reputation is based on the research published or job title, not skill as a therapist which no group measures.

*Throughout this book the term “therapist” refers to “psychotherapist” though other professionals also use this noun (physical therapist, occupational therapist, respiratory therapist, etc.)

What every buyer of therapy wants is for their problem to be quickly explained, in ordinary language so it makes sense; and then to be helped with changing their life or that of their child. This therapy—effective therapy—is priceless. Though costing less than the exorbitant fees charged by some.

This book enables you to gain value for your money. More expensive is not necessarily better, as readers of *Consumer Reports* know and Pat discovered. But even knowledgeable therapists can have difficulty gaining effective treatment. One psychoanalyst, after being warned of the dire consequences were she to discontinue her treatment, wrote, “In retrospect, fleeing that analysis was one of the healthiest steps I took in my life.” Another psychoanalyst described his treatment experience: “Luckily, in later therapies...I was able or enabled to break out of these deathlike hours on the couch.”*

Though simply written, the information in this book is sophisticated. And, because people tend to forget facts but remember stories, many anecdotes are included. Some you may find unforgettable. Like those of the abused American wife who, along with her children, was forced to hide in a deserted apartment in Iraqi occupied Kuwait; and the reformed ex-member of the Witness Protection Program who again hungered for his pistol.

Here, there is drama. But no greater than is present in any life were it to be closely studied. As psychotherapists have the privilege of doing.

Read how the lives of these women, men, and children were changed. And yours will be too.

*Berman, Emanuel, “Others' Failures—And One's Own.” In Reppen, Joseph and Schulman, Martin A., *Failures in Psychoanalytic Treatment*, International Universities Press, Madison, CT, 2002, p. 265. This is a valuable book; the paper by Ann-Louise S. Silver, M.D., Thorns in the Rose Garden: Failures at Chestnut Lodge, is particularly moving (pp. 37-62).

Chapter One

When Psychotherapists Are Toxic:

Melanie and Hugh, In Crisis

Melanie

MELANIE FELT DEPRESSED. So would anyone living her life, she thought. She had been forty for three days. As a Budding Senior Citizen, she wondered if the AARP had a special membership category for her. She knew this was a crazy thought but it was how she felt. Unmarried and childless, living in a small Manhattan apartment, she had always feared this would be her fate.

On her thirty-fifth birthday, Melanie vowed to kill herself if she wasn't married within five years. Now, this Friday evening in early November, it was time to act.

Leaving her office, Melanie carried her black Cross briefcase and laptop case, the common accessories of tax lawyers. Her firm was the first to move from downtown Wall Street to Madison Avenue, so she could avoid the subway and walk to work. Drifting slowly along the eight blocks to her apartment, her final trip she told herself, she watched children beside their mothers. Eavesdropping, and wishing that they were her's. "Hold my hand when we cross the street." "Right after you do your homework, dear."

And, what hurt most, the declaration from a man to his companion: "I adore you." Yet I'm so much prettier, Melanie thought. She puzzled over her lonely life and remembered the opening line from a trashy novel, *Peyton Place*, which she found in the back of a closet and devoured when she was twelve: "Indian summer is like a woman, ripe and passionate." Not anymore—it's over, she thought.

Melanie returned the doorman's greeting with a tight smile and rode the empty elevator to her apartment. There, she flung her briefcase into a corner and barely kept herself from doing the same with her laptop. Though what does it matter now, she told herself as she undressed, consumed by the thought that she would soon be dead without ever having loved.

Even her hot shower, an after-work ritual, couldn't dissolve this obsession. Fearing that she might change her mind, Melanie quickly grabbed the vial of Xanax from the night table and the unopened bottle of limited edition malt Scotch from a kitchen cabinet. The bottle she was saving for her engagement party which never arrived.

Melanie's parents were dead and she hadn't spoken with her brother in four years. No one would mourn her. As she considered this, tears began flowing. First singly, then in rivers. Her body convulsed with emotion as she threw herself onto the bed before falling into a deep sleep.

Melanie was less depressed when she awoke seven hours later, to begin another of her lonely weekends. Hours filled with Yoga classes, rented movies, and unneeded shopping. During the 11PM news on Sunday, while Melanie congratulated herself on having survived another weekend, she again began thinking that her life was meaningless and she would be better off dead. Rousing herself, Melanie flushed the Xanax down the toilet and grabbed the Yellow Pages, remembering that several co-workers had credited psychotherapy for their happiness and marriage.

As Melanie scanned the ads for a therapist her depression lifted—as it always did when she became involved in a project. One ad caught her attention: “Specializing in Love Relationships. Trained at Ivy League Universities. Evening Appointments Available.” The words “love” and “Ivy League” seemed to speak directly to Melanie, who graduated from Harvard.

Melanie dialed the doctor's number. She was impressed that he was automatically paged and returned her phone message quickly though it was Sunday night. He scheduled her appointment for Monday evening.

The doctor's hushed waiting room was a welcome retreat from the noise of the city. He was in his fifties, gray haired and of average height. His black suit and striped Guardsman tie bespoke solemnity. He greeted Melanie with a warm handshake. When she described being lonely, the doctor smilingly responded, “I can help you with that.”

Leaving his office, Melanie felt hopeful. Probably because I spoke so openly, she told herself.

Hugh

Unlike Melanie, Hugh was married and had children. He was one of the few workers with a college degree at the auto plant he worked. Because of his education and seriousness he was repeatedly offered promotion to a foreman's job. But he always turned it down, not wanting to have to judge his co-workers. Particularly those who made his role as union shop steward nearly impossible. “Goof-off” was the least colorful adjective he applied to them.

He tried ignoring them but they wouldn't let up and harassed him by sabotaging his work. Once they stole equipment and placed suspicion for the theft on him. Which the plant manager refused to believe. Were Hugh less resolute he would have quit his job. Instead, at his wife's suggestion, he told their family doctor about the stress on his job. But the doctor said little and wrote a prescription for a tranquilizer.

Neither Hugh's doctor or his tormentors knew how dangerous Hugh had been.

Hugh grew up in a series of foster homes, each worse than the other. On his good days he was ignored; more frequently, he was beaten. When he was fifteen he ran away and lived on the streets, supporting himself through low-level drug selling activity. Because of his intelligence and great size, Hugh advanced quickly in the gang. One day, as he lay drunk on a sofa, his doorbell rang. Two young women asked if they could discuss the Mormon religion with him. “They were so pretty I would have listened to anything they said,” he told me.

Hugh did more than just listen. He stopped drinking and moved a thousand miles away to attend a Mormon college. There he married another student, Kristine. By the time his sixth child was born he had nearly forgotten his earlier life: the crimes he committed and the murders he narrowly missed being involved in. He avoided prison by informing, and then entered the Witness Protection Program. Now his best friend was the county sheriff.

Hugh's youngest daughter was turning six. To surprise her, he hid her birthday present in his locker at work: the American Girl doll she so wanted. Even the gruffest of his co-workers admired it. At quitting time, Hugh immediately identified the pungent odor from his locker. Kerosene had been sprayed through the vents onto the doll. Hugh's face tightened as rage poured through him. That feeling which, decades before, he had prayed to lose forever. “They didn't know who they were dealing with,” he told me. “Years before I would have killed them without a second thought.”

Hugh didn't remember leaving the plant. He thought only of getting his pistol which lay hidden in the basement, wrapped in plastic under a loose cement block beside the washer. While driving home he passed a familiar billboard which he seemed to notice for the first time: “Stress Getting You Down? See Our Therapist Before Your Divorce Attorney.” Though Kristine would be the only woman in his life, the ad made sense to him. Hugh stopped his car by the side of the road and dialed the clinic's number. When the receptionist answered he told her that he wanted to make an appointment. She put him through to the doctor on call.

The doctor's voice was soothing. Hugh said he was suffering from work stress and an appointment was scheduled for later that evening.

Hugh was calmer when he arrived home. He played with his children, complimented Kristine on her cooking, and then drove to the clinic. Hugh felt that by calling this clinic he had made the right decision.

But he and Melanie could not have been more wrong. By choosing their particular therapists both had made one of the biggest mistakes of their lives.

Before describing their experiences and those of others you will meet on these pages, I should perhaps declare my position: *I believe in psychotherapy!* When effective it can transform lives and, by reducing stress, even forestall the development of physical illness. But some therapists cause unnecessary anxiety, depression, and wasted years. They provide treatment which is as destructive as botched heart surgery—even while being warm and friendly. Just like lawyers, auto salespeople, and others who successfully market their wares. A skillful psychotherapist would be a far better choice. As Melanie and Hugh wished they had

initially made.

But what they did had seemed so correct. Each recognized their unhappiness and sought treatment from a well-credentialed, licensed professional. Doing just what troubled people are always advised. Yet before getting the right help, they endured unnecessary suffering. That pain which you might experience, or be experiencing, too.

End of Chapter One

Note: Though this content is accurate, the text formatting differs in the printed and E-book editions.