



COUCH SURFING

A therapy veteran goes shopping for the One: a new shrink who can help him finally conquer his fear of, yes, commitment. By Steve Friedman

The first guy asks me to remove my sneakers before I enter his office, so of course I don't trust him. Who says "sneakers"? And if I have to remove my shoes, how come he gets to wear his? Plus, through the partially opened door I can see a king-size mattress on the floor, which creeps me out. And he's wearing an ugly purple shirt.

I know enough about the talking cure to realize that by focusing on Mr. X's (no real names here, because I think it's the decent thing to do) off-putting attributes, I might be manifesting what those in the field call "resistance" and what an ex has called my "very strong and sadly self-defeating dickheadedness." I know if I want help, I need to be open to help. I know that Mr. X comes recommended. But I also know that along with many capable and hardworking men and women, the professional therapeutic ranks are stuffed with less helpful types, ranging from ineffective and very expensive mmm-hmmers to charismatic and dangerous charlatans. I know this be-

cause I've been seeing therapists off and (mostly) on for the past 30 years, including the same one (helpful and reasonably priced), weekly, for the past 20. Also, I claim long-standing membership in a self-styled anonymous support group; count myself as a graduate of emotional-release retreats, meditation workshops, and "breakthrough" weekends; incline toward self-involvement; and make my living as a writer. Full, slightly embarrassing disclosure: I've consulted psychics, plural.

And here I am with the man in purple. Am I crazy to distrust this guy? Or is he someone not to be trusted? The age-old questions.

"So," Mr. X says when I'm seated, "what would you like to talk about?"

What I'd like to talk about is the no-shoe rule. But I can't. But maybe I should. Is my indecisiveness part of my problem? Or do I need to think less, act more? What is wrong with me?

"So," I say.

I'm seeking a new therapist because, after 20 years, my old one hasn't helped

as much as I'd like in the one area I most want help with, which is to say, love/intimacy/partnership. To be more specific, I've had lots of girlfriends, but none have lasted. They fall into two categories. The first are the sweet, intelligent, caring ones. After three or four months of bliss, I decide—though *decide* isn't the right word, because the thought strikes me with such elemental, apocalyptic force—that I'm not in love with them, that to stay with them would be to consign myself to a grim, terrible living death. So I break up. The second category are sweet, intelligent, and caring, I'm sure, just not toward me. They're insistent from the beginning that what we have will never work, because they're engaged to someone else, or because I'm too lazy, too old, too this, too that, that they are in this for fun, but not for the long run—and those are the women I decide will be Mrs. Friedman.

To find a new therapist, I consulted friends, including guys from my anonymous support group, and when I mentioned that to an ex, she wondered if

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"those wounded crackpots" were really the best sources for referrals. She had a point, but these were guys who were trying to get better, just like I am. I trusted them. I wanted help. I needed help. I got five names.

I tell the no-shoes guy my problems. That takes about 25 minutes. He listens. He furrows his brow. He says that it sounds like I have a good understanding of my issues. Maybe he's not so bad.

"But all the understanding in the world hasn't helped you, and it's not going to help you."

"Well, it's helped a little bit," I say.

"We're going to do primal work," the guy tells me. "We're going to reexperience the trauma you suffered as a child, and through that, you'll be freed from it."

I ask if that's what the mattress is for. (It is.) Am I going to have to get on that mattress? (Probably so.) What if I don't remember any big childhood trauma?

He furrows his brow again and tells me the trauma will come up, but it'll take time. To be exact, twice-a-week, \$200 sessions for a minimum of three years. This first consultation is just \$175. Oh, and I have to promise I won't see any other therapists during our treatment. Too easy to play one off the other, he says.

it nor any answer I can come up with is terribly useful, because self-flagellation and eternal uncertainty are two of the problems I need to overcome. They are two problems that many people seeking professional help need to overcome. And there's the rub. The advice to "just follow your gut" doesn't get me anywhere. It's my gut that got me into so much trouble in the first place. My gut told me that the woman who threatened in public to smash a lamp on my skull was a perfectly suitable life partner and that the woman who told me she wanted to bear my children and grow old together was trying to crush my spirit. If my gut were a good gut, a wise gut, and if I just trusted that unerringly healthy gut, I'd wake up whistling, accept my occasional descents into gloominess with equanimity, if not delight, and live happily and therapy-free ever after. But my gut is not to be trusted!

The second recommended therapist, Al, seems like he might be perfect. He listens. He nods a lot. He mentions—when I inquire about the smartphone-size wooden cross hanging from his neck—that he's Catholic but committed to not imposing his religious beliefs on anyone. When I tell him I haven't drunk alcohol in many years, he says that he too is so-

He replies that he is impressed with my self-awareness, but that therapy is about me, not him, and that whether he is gay or straight doesn't really matter, and I say I've just explained why it does matter and that I don't understand why he's avoiding the question. He asks if I often suspect people are withholding information. Yes, I say, and I mention how my mother put raisins in the casserole when I was a kid but wouldn't admit there were raisins in there, even when I found the raisins.

He looks at his phone. "We have done great work here today," he says. "We've really gotten at a lot of stuff."

"I still want an answer," I say.

"We'll discuss it next time."

"You should call my old shrink, Inga," my friend Eric tells me. "She's Dutch. She'll kick your ass."

"Um, I don't want someone to kick my ass. I want someone who understands me."

"That's your problem," he says, "you just want coddling. You need someone to kick your ass!"

More than a few people suggest medication, and I consider it. The thing is, I've taken medication. I took it for two

"THAT'S YOUR PROBLEM: YOU JUST WANT CODDLING," MY FRIEND ERIC SAYS. "YOU SHOULD CALL MY OLD SHRINK, INGA. SHE'S DUTCH. SHE'LL KICK YOUR ASS."

He asks if I understand the ground rules and will agree to them. I furrow my brow back at him and say, I think so.

When I ask about insurance, he explains that because of onerous New York licensing regulations, he's not covered, that in fact, even though he did rigorous training in primal therapy (and worked for years as an actor), he isn't technically, under state law, a therapist. He gives me his card. He's a life coach. I thank him, put on my sneakers, and run.

Might he have helped me? Possibly. Am I afraid of what might be uncovered during the excavation of my not-entirely-remembered childhood? Duh. Should I relax about the shoes issue? Probably.

A trickier question: Am I reluctant to commit to a new therapist because I've grown comfortable with my old one, precisely because she enables my whining and avoidance of the difficult, doubtless painful decisions that will bring me into adulthood? That question appeals to my self-flagellating core, but neither

ber. I get to keep my shoes on. He'd want to see me once a week, at \$200 a pop, and I'd also have to commit to weekly group therapy. He asks if I have any questions.

"I'm not sure that it makes a difference, but I can't tell if you're straight or gay, and I'm, um, I'm curious."

He replies that he's glad I'm so direct and wonders why I want to know.

"Well, first, because this is about my struggles with romance and intimacy, so I think it would be helpful if I knew where you were in that regard, and second, because a lot of my therapists have been women and I sometimes suspect that even though I can be an idiot and a horrible person, I have my charms, and I worry that I have manipulated those therapists into seeing my point of view when it comes to the wisdom—which is really stupidity—behind why I have broken up with so many women." I tell him that if he were gay, he might prove more susceptible to my charms, which would not help me.

years, three years ago. It worked, and it had side effects. I was happier but more numb. More productive; less engaged with my work. Less anxious, slightly foggy. I got no closer to clarity or contentment regarding women and love.

The third therapist I see is hard of hearing, so I yell at her about the raisin casserole and love, and after 10 minutes, she tells me I'm codependent, which could be true, but which seems a very quickly formed diagnosis. She also mentions three leaders in the field of codependence with whom she has studied and/or spoken on panels. I think she must feel insecure, and that the name-dropping is a form of compensatory behavior. If nothing else, one who's been in therapy for a time learns the language.

When Al asks me a week later, at the start of our second session, how I'm doing, I say I'm doing okay, and then I ask him again whether he's straight or gay.

"Steve," he says, "uncomfortable feelings come up, and that's okay; in fact,

those feelings can be helpful, as long as they are discussed. So if you feel like I'm looking at your legs instead of listening to you talk, and you say so, we can address that."

Am I reexperiencing some decades-old anger? Am I confronting my homophobia? Or am I registering a healthy distrust of someone who won't answer a direct question but is instead being oddly insinuating?

I say nothing. I think I glower a bit.

"Let me ask you something," Al says. "Are there any other reasons why knowing my sexuality is important to you?"

Fair question, and I try to give a fair answer. I tell him that my seventh-grade English teacher molested me. "So I have some trust issues with men, especially with men who are supposed to be helping me."

"I understand," Al says. "And that's very honest and brave of you to say, and I appreciate it."

"Right," I say. "So?"

"We are doing some great work here today!" Al exclaims. "And I need to tell you, the therapeutic protocol is set up in a way that the therapist doesn't reveal

back in her reclining chair. Her small dog sits at her feet. She didn't ask if it was okay for a dog to sit in on my session.

I'm about six minutes into my issues about intimacy and women and my childhood when Inga interrupts me. "Your normal attachment process with your mother was broken," she says. "Completely broken."

"Well, actually, that might be true, but I was just getting to the part where—"

"Stop," Inga says. "Just stop. You have serious attachment issues, and we are going to work through those."

"Well, I've been seeing a therapist for 20 years, and the whole girlfriend thing notwithstanding, I think I've made some progress on—"

"You have wasted 20 years and a lot of money."

Inga really is an ass kicker.

She then proceeds to tell me that I will be seeing her weekly, as well as attending one of the groups she leads, and that, if I like, I may attend her five-day retreat in Puerto Rico: "How Men Feel About Their Bodies."

Actually, I feel okay about my body. It's a little bit flabby, sort of bald on top,

"But paying for hand jobs doesn't really seem like it's going to get me closer to intimacy."

"I don't accept all the shame-based feelings in society toward sex. If paying for hand jobs relieves stress, I think it's fine."

Is she crazy? Or intentionally provocative? Is it a Dutch thing? I'm suddenly aware of how much I hate Inga's dog.

"I'm going to really piss you off," Inga says. "Because your mother pissed you off. Our relationship is going to recreate the relationship you had with your mother, and then we're going to work through your broken-attachment issues."

Was Inga a kind of hand-job-loving genius? Was my alarm just a manifestation of my broken-attachment issue? Inga was different, that was for sure. And, I should mention, the friend who recommended her had dated as compulsively and as unhappily as I had, and after a couple years with Inga, he met someone, and they've been happily married for three years.

Inga tells me she charges \$375 for individual sessions, \$80 for group. And the men's bodies thing is another \$950, not including food, travel, or lodging.

I TELL THE THERAPIST I'M NOT SURE I CAN AFFORD HER \$375 FEE. "THAT'S YOUR FEAR OF ATTACHMENT COMING UP," SHE SAYS.

that kind of information about himself. It interferes with what's most important, which is working through the client's issues."

"But you already told me that you're Catholic, and that you stopped drinking, so claiming therapeutic nondisclosure on this one particular topic feels weird. All I can think of is that you're trying to manipulate me or that you're somehow ashamed of your sexuality. And either one of those distresses me and makes me feel like you can't help me."

Al says he understands. He tells me we have done some really good work today. Some really, really good work.

"Al," I say. "I don't want to be a jerk here, and I feel like a jerk, but I want to be clear. If you won't tell me whether you're straight or gay, I'm not going to see you again."

He pauses. Then he says, "I promise I'll take this up with my supervisory board and have an answer for you next time you come in."

"So," Inga the ass kicker says, leaning

but generally okay. And I'm not sure I want to spend a week in Puerto Rico with Inga and a bunch of guys.

"It's a good way for men to really address how they feel about their bodies. Plus, it's the only way I could figure out to get a free week in Puerto Rico."

Inga is not bound by conventional notions of therapy or discourse, I'll give her that.

I ask her how long it will take before I'll be able to conquer my three-month freak-out thing. How much work with Inga before I'll be able to find love?

That's hard to estimate, she estimates, but Inga suggests I not date for the first year of what will be at least two or three years of work, so that I can break my patterns and learn about myself.

"That makes a kind of sense," I say. "But it sounds pretty lonely, too."

"Well, you can get massages and pay for hand jobs," Inga says.

"Excuse me?"

"You can pay for hand jobs," Inga says.

"Did you say I can pay for hand jobs?"

"Yes, it'll be better for you than dating."

I tell her that my insurance doesn't cover out-of-network therapists. (I think Inga is the definition of "out of network.") I tell her I can't afford \$375 a week. Inga frowns. She reaches down and scratches her dog. She says she could come down, for me, to \$325. I tell her I'll have to think about it.

"This is your fear of attachment coming up. You're afraid to attach to me."

I ask whether the group alone might help. She says yes, if that was all I could afford.

I tell her I'll consider it. As I rise to leave, she rises too and says that at the end of each group session, members hug, because these are people who struggle with attachment, and they're afraid of physical contact, and hugging helps them get over that.

I don't think I'm afraid of physical contact, and I hug lots of people, but okay, if that's how it works.

"So," I ask, "are we supposed to hug now?"

"Yes, if you want to," Inga says.

I don't want to but don't want to hurt

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her feelings. So I hug her. I suspect this is the wrong move, and I wish I felt more confident about knowing when to make the right move.

Shortly after I arrive back at my apartment, Al calls.

"We need to consider what prompts your question, why it's important," Al says. "There is a reasonably sound reason for your asking—that you suffered a betrayal of trust in your life with your teacher—so I have talked to the supervisory board and I'm going to tell you that I am gay, that I have been out and comfortable with being gay since I was 16."

"Okay," I say. "Thanks."

"But I'm telling you this with the caveat that you know this is not my being strong-armed. That would not be helpful to you or to our process."

I thank him again and say I'll process the information. This is one benefit of 30 years of therapy. When I feel uncomfortable or want to hang up or get away, instead of saying goodbye, I say I'm going to process.

I complain to friends, inside and outside my support group. Pray, a few suggest. Suck it up and stop bellyaching, others recommend. "Drugs, dude, drugs!" agree a few guys I shoot hoops with. "Stop torturing yourself and call Dr. Feelgood."

"You don't need a therapist," an old friend exhorts. "Therapy starts from the position that there's something wrong with you, that you need fixing. You don't need fixing. You just need to make better decisions. And that means life coach!"

A number of people (all married) tell me that maybe I just think I want a partner. Maybe what I really want is to stay single, to date a different woman every few months.

This is what my former shrink had suggested a couple times as well. Maybe I should just accept that I didn't really want a partner. I would accept it if that was what I wanted. But I don't *know* what I want. I only know what I don't want. What I don't want is to feel, after three months of romance, the jolt of confusion/indifference/gotta-get-outta-here-ness.

Go on the Paleo diet, an ex suggests. Cut out gluten, says a woman I meet at a party. Study *The Tools*. Read Eckhart Tolle. Surrender to love.

All the advice makes me angry. Angry at my friends. Angry at the molesting seventh-grade teacher. Angry at the support group, which I am beginning to view as a club of self-involved assholes who a few times a week get to moan about how

brave they are and to frame their sleazy behavior in a self-forgiving light. Mostly, of course, I'm angry at myself.

An ex with whom I have lunch three times a year commands me to see her former therapist, "unless you're even more invested in being miserable than I suspect." First (because I don't trust my ex? Because I don't trust therapists? The caserole?), I do a little research. He's been quoted by Oprah. He's written books and graduated from Harvard. One of his articles mentions a "glamorous couple" he helped with their intimacy issues. I decide he's a pretentious, shallow media whore.

There is a kitchenette in the room where I meet Barney, which I find odd. Also, the one spot on his couch where I'm clearly supposed to sit is saggy, and I can't do anything but sink back. Is this intentional? Is he maneuvering me into a defenseless and vulnerable position? He is wearing a sort of silver amulet around his neck. I don't trust men who wear necklaces.

I give him my spiel, which I've condensed to about 14 minutes. He tells me that he uses various modalities—psychodynamic, cognitive, Gestalt—and that any good therapist does the same. I nod with what I hope is sagacity.

He wants to help me see each moment as "new rather than repetitive" and to help "change compulsions to choices." He sees his role as akin to that of a piano teacher. "I can help you with scales and exercises," he says, "but it's what you do outside our sessions—the practice—that will really make a difference." He goes on to take a swipe at traditional psychotherapy, talking about troubled souls who, after years and years of discussing their past and their patterns, "leave stuffed with insights, like a tick," but are unable to do anything with them. How I operate in the present is what counts, he says. He also tells me that he suspects—"but it's just a hypothesis; what matters is how this resonates with you"—that I suffer from a "heavy dose of engulfment anxiety." It sort of resonates. It might resonate more if I weren't wondering what kind of deal he had with Oprah, and, if it was any good, why he had to practice in a place with a kitchenette.

Still, I like this guy. The emphasis on behavior. The humility about diagnosis. The workmanlike approach to getting better. I don't completely trust him, but that might be my issue.

I make an appointment to see him the following week. Maybe I'll bring up the couch and the necklace then. •