

General Recovery - How to Identify Safe People

Counselors and recovery programs often encourage us to seek out the support of trustworthy people when sharing about our past or coping with our current struggles. I am fond of reminding my clients that people who have a relationship with at least one or two “everyday friends” (people who really know them) rarely become mentally ill. But folks often ask me how they are to know if another person is safe? When one has been repeatedly wounded by other humans, one has no experience by which to identify a potential friend. Here are some guidelines for choosing safe people (and beware...identifying safe people will involve some risk on your part):

1) Safe people will keep your confidence in small things, thereby showing you they can be trusted with deeper information; 2) Safe people pursue (call/talk/seek out) you as much as you pursue them; 3) Safe people help you about as much as you help them with problems/tasks, etc.; 4) Safe people go progressively deeper in sharing with you as you do so with them; they know all the good and bad in your history over time and still love you; 5) Safe people are available/interruptible- they can be called on in a small (your washing machine went out) or large crisis (your spouse cheated on you) to offer help and support without your fearing what they will think of you; 6) Safe people can be confronted by you about their faults/weaknesses and be told they hurt your feelings. They then make efforts to change their behavior in the relationship without threats to leave you (did I mention this works both ways?). 7) Safe people have emotional reactions that are proportionate to the situation (they don't have huge feelings in response to small issues with you or others). Hope this list (albeit non-exhaustive) is helpful to you as you learn to identify safe people and become a safer person yourself. Remember that we are all in process!