

## **Choosing A Personal Growth Program**

Ten questions to help you make an informed decision

By Chris Mathe

Maybe you're in a rut. Or, you may have very specific behaviors or patterns that hold you back from what you want in life. Maybe it seems that your life is on a downward slide. Or, perhaps there are no major problems in your life, but you find yourself wondering if this is all there is. You may even be in therapy but don't seem to be making the progress you'd like. Whatever the reason, you may feel it is time for a change. What do you do?

You probably know friends, family, or co-workers that have gone through one personal growth program or another that they can't stop talking about. They seem to be very excited about what their program has done for them. They have plenty to say about breaking negative patterns and moving forward in their lives. They may even get pretty aggressive about getting you to go through the program as well. You are intrigued, but also wary. What they say sounds great, but you may also have heard some horror stories about secrecy, cults, and brainwashing.

### **Personal Growth Program Basics**

The Human Potential Movement blossomed in the 1950's and 1960's. Sensitivity and encounter groups spread rapidly, promising increased communication, intensified experience, and expanded consciousness. Business, educational, and other groups were sold "sensitivity training" programs, some conducted by psychologists, but most led by non-professionals who used the processes and techniques developed by psychologists. There soon appeared the commercially packaged large-group awareness trainings (LGATs), which combined a number of the encounter and sensitivity techniques with various sales, influence, and behavior modification techniques.

Most of today's commercial LGATs grew out of a format developed in the early 1960s by William Penn Patrick, who labeled his venture Leadership Dynamics Institute (LDI). Perhaps the most widely known offshoot of this training was est (Erhard Seminars Training) and exists today in modified form as The Landmark Forum. You've probably heard of others: Lifespring, Insight Seminars, New Warriors, Impact... The list is very long. Now there are literally thousands of personal growth programs available all over the world.

There are many detractors of various programs who complain about the techniques used, the high-pressure sales and recruitment tactics, and the potential for psychological damage. It seems, however, that most program attendees report positive results ranging from "It was interesting and useful" to "It was the most important and impactful thing I have ever done in my life!" Some attendees even report tremendous, life-changing results bordering on the miraculous.

I am a graduate of two different personal growth trainings. My experience with one program was extremely positive and I was generally well satisfied with the other. It is not my purpose to

tell you which are the “good” trainings and which are the “bad”. Any attempt to compare and contrast all the personal growth programs available would require many hundreds of pages, years of research, and would be out of date as soon as it was published. Instead, the purpose of this article is to help you become a savvy personal growth consumer and find the program, if any, that is right for you. What is most important when considering a personal growth program is that you make an informed decision: know what you want, learn about the programs available, and choose the program that best fits your goals and belief system.

## Ten Questions

Below I discuss ten questions you can ask of yourself and of the personal growth programs you are considering before making an informed choice. You’ll probably come up with several more questions. Remember: you don’t have to be apologetic or defensive about critically assessing how you can best move along your personal growth path. You deserve to know as much as possible about any program you are considering. Here we go:

**What do you want?** The more specifically you can define how you want your life to change, the easier it is to find a program that supports your goals. You may say you want more happiness, or more self-esteem, or better relationships, or less anger – whatever. How would the achievement of your desires look in your life? Specifically, what would you be doing differently? How would you be feeling? If you can not define exactly what you are seeking, maybe that is your goal: to find out who you are and where you are going.

**Who are you doing the program for?** Are you considering a program because someone is pushing you to do it? Maybe someone who has gone through a particular program is giving you a high-pressure sales pitch. It is crucially important that you choose a program for YOU. While a positive change in your life will certainly be beneficial to those around you, make sure you are attending a program for you – not for them.

**What are the principles upon which the program is based?** Is the program religiously or secularly based? Is there a spiritual component? How open-ended is the program’s approach to emotions and spirituality? Is it mostly lecture or experiential? Is the program confrontational and authoritarian or supportive and compassionate? Are challenging questions about the program expected and encouraged and are the answers direct and responsive? Depending on what you are looking for, the answers to these questions may be positives or negatives. No matter what program you are considering, the program’s representatives should be able to clearly define the psychological, emotional, and spiritual principles upon which the program is based. Are these principles accepting and inclusionary? Be careful of programs based on the teachings of a single person or that have a highly structured “dogma” associated with them.

Many personal growth programs are practicing intensive, group psychotherapy whether they call it that or not. If they are using guided meditations, experiential exercises, psycho-dramatic regression, role-playing, and other techniques that elicit strong emotional reactions, they better be well trained in group psychotherapy and have a firm background in psychological theory. Which leads us to our next question...

**What is the background of the facilitators?** In general, the higher the level of emotional intensity of the program, the more important the therapeutic background of the facilitators. If this program professes to create dramatic, life-changing results, then you should have

complete confidence in their professionalism and their ability to deal with emotionally charged, deep-seated psychological material. The fact that a facilitator is a great speaker, or an excellent motivator, or a “certified” trainer in the program does not necessarily qualify them to facilitate deep emotional change in individuals and groups. It is always preferable that any intensive emotional program be facilitated by at least one experienced clinical psychotherapist.

**Is there a screening process for potential participants?** What kind of people will you be going through this program with? Are the participants screened for suitability by a professional screener to maximize individual and group success? Under what circumstances are people accepted or turned down? Beware of programs whose basic screening process is to check to see if you have enough money to pay the program fee.

**How many participants go through the program at one time?** The number of participants in personal growth programs varies widely. A few programs limit their class size to less than 20, while others may routinely operate with classes of several hundred at a time. Most fall somewhere in between. In general, the smaller the class size, the more personal and individual work you will be able to do. The best programs will strike a balance between the learning and growth potential of group work and individualized and focused personal work. Groups of more than 15 or 20 tend to break up into sub-groups and cliques so that the camaraderie and trust necessary for productive group interaction can break down and “group think” can take its place.

**What is the ratio of staff to participants?** Some programs have only one facilitator and a few staff to handle several hundred participants. Imagine how much focused, individualized attention each participant would receive in such a situation. In general, the higher the ratio of staff to participants, the better. There are programs, believe it or not, that have a ratio of staff to participants greater than one – more staff than participants!

**What training does the staff have?** This is similar and related to the question about the background of the facilitators. What is the role of the staff in the program? Are they basically “stage hands” or do they help the facilitators coach and interact with the participants? Any staff person that assists the facilitators should have the appropriate training and experience to do so. Are staff members formally trained? How much

### Red Flags

While by no means complete, the following list of “red flags” might help you sort through the thousands of personal growth programs. If a program you are considering has one of these red flags, step back, resist any pressures (internal or external) to make a decision, and ask more questions. If a program you are considering has two or more red flags, my recommendation is to avoid that program like the plague.

- Any sort of secrecy around the processes and techniques used (This is very different from protecting the confidentiality of any participant’s work, which should be absolutely sacred).
- Any refusal to answer questions from or coordinate with your therapist or counselor.
- Programs built on the ideas and/or leadership of one charismatic person.
- Nagging doubts about the facilitators, staff, or program content.
- Challenging, defensive, or discounting responses to your questions.
- Vague and over general promises of universal success.
- Any “hard-sell” tactics.
- Any pressure on graduates to recruit more participants.

training? In addition to learning how to staff the program, are the staff members trained on the ethical, legal, and psychological implications and responsibilities of staffing?

**What after-program support is there?** This can be a very important issue. Imagine that the program produced all of your desired results and your life really did change substantially. Such transformative changes, no matter how positive they are for you personally, can lead to destabilization in your primary relationships, dealings with friends, and your work life. Several weeks of competent, supportive, and professional aftercare should be available so that you can integrate what you have learned and deal with whatever instability might arise. Make sure that these aftercare meetings are for YOU and not designed to help you recruit more participants. Who runs the aftercare program? What is their background and qualifications? Is additional support available after the designated amount of support meetings are over?

**Are you making an informed decision?** If you are considering ANYTHING that could change your life substantially, be sure you are making a decision based on a critical analysis of as much information, pro and con, as is reasonably possible. Just as you would research, question, and apply critical thinking to things like getting married, taking or quitting a job, having a child, or making a big investment, take that same attitude with you when deciding on how to further your personal growth. Some programs are very secretive about the processes employed and expect you to pay your money and attend the program without making a rational and informed decision. They may even turn any questioning back on to the potential participant by challenging them to “get out of their head” and “trust the process.” It is much easier to “trust the process” if you are actively encouraged to ask any questions and get direct, responsive answers.

Another important part of making an informed decision is being able to meet and question the actual facilitator of your particular session. If you are not allowed to talk with the facilitator or, upon talking with them, you do not feel completely at ease with the idea of this person leading you through intense personal emotional work, run – do not walk – away from this program.

## **Making the decision**

Your personal story and your needs for your own personal growth and healing are unique. There are many, many ways to go about getting help in reaching your personal goals: personal reflection and research, talking to friends and family, religious involvement, individual and group therapy, workshops and seminars, etc. Finding the mix of these approaches that is right for you is a very personal journey. Any person or group that purports to have THE answer for you is highly suspect.

Get on the Internet, go to the library, discuss pros and cons with trusted and respected people – get informed before making a decision on any program. In facing any potentially life-changing decision, fear and/or anxiety are natural. If however, after asking all the questions and doing all your research, you still have fears about the program content, facilitators, or staff, don't make a final decision.

Along these lines, when talking to any program representative, especially a facilitator, what is your emotional “hit” on that person? If words like integrity, professional, respectful, ethical, trustworthy, or skilled come to mind, that's a good sign. If words like salesperson, defensive,

evasive, pushy, slick, or aggressive come to mind, you should probably reconsider plans to attend that program.

### **How much should I pay?**

Conspicuously missing from this discussion is the question of price. This is a tough one. If a program really was able to help you achieve some life-changing goals or a greater sense of peace, happiness, or worthiness, what is that worth? Only you can answer that. Expect to pay anywhere from a few hundred dollars to many thousands. Prices vary as much as the programs themselves. The length of each program varies as well – anywhere from two to ten days. No matter what the cost, realize that you will be investing a considerable amount of your time and emotional energy as well as your dollars and, even if the program meets or exceeds your goals, there could be significant “ripple effects” on your family, friends, and work.

If you are in therapy, discuss the program with your therapist and how it might benefit or hinder your therapeutic progress. Your therapist may not know specifically about the program that you are considering, and it is a good idea for him or her to contact the facilitator or other program representative. If you trust and respect your therapist (if you don't, why are you there?), listen carefully to his or her opinions and assessments of the program you are considering. The ideal outcome is where you, your therapist, and the personal growth program can coordinate efforts towards your desired goals. If you decide to participate in a personal growth program, I strongly urge you to stay in therapy to help support your aftercare.

If you are not in therapy, you might consider a few sessions with a therapist that you respect and trust to help you define and gain some clarity on your personal issues and goals. Such an investment of time and money can greatly focus your efforts and multiply the benefits of a personal growth program.

### **Conclusions**

If you are considering participating in any program that purports to create “life-changing” results, develop a healthy skepticism. Ask plenty of questions (not just those I have suggested above) and get familiar with the program's content, facilitators, and significant staff. An important thing to realize is your growth, personal or otherwise, is a process, not an event. There is no program, book, philosophy, or guru that can “heal” you or fulfill all your personal goals in just a few days. Growth is accompanied by plenty of effort, pain, joy, awareness... and time. By becoming an informed advocate for your own needs and goals, you can find the people and programs that can best assist you along this life-long quest for self-improvement.

#### **About the Author**

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