

GROWING UP

Step Away from the “Guarantee”

By Dan Florell, Ph.D. & Praveena Salins, M.D.

A couple is huddled over a computer looking for information on why their son might be having trouble focusing his attention. They find a website that guarantees immediate results or their money back. The website appears and claims very impressive results, even including positive testimonials from other parents who have used the services for their children. The couple is convinced that this treatment might be the one that finally works for their child. Besides, the treatment is guaranteed so they can get their money back if it does not work.

This scenario is all too common, and many families end up spending thousands of dollars on treatments that are ineffective and some cases dangerous. A rule of thumb when dealing with either medical or mental health services, is that whenever there is a guarantee or personal testimonials touting a treatment or intervention, just stay away. The only places to seek out guarantees are for mechanical and electronic devices.

It would be great if medical and mental health services offered a guarantee of effectiveness, but we cannot. There is too much variability between people to ever offer a guarantee that the particular treatment or intervention will work. Due to the uncertainty of how any one individual may react to a particular treatment, medical and mental health associations do not allow their members to guarantee the success of treatments. This is why legitimate health care workers don't offer guarantees.

If someone is offering a guarantee, the odds are good that the measure of the treatment's effectiveness is tilted in favor of the practitioner administering the treatment. An example would be creating a “test” specific to the intervention where the treatment consists of teaching to that “test” so progress can be proved. The improvement in this case would be due to practicing for the test, not a gain in a particular skill that will generalize to other situations.

The same caution should be used when a practitioner uses client testimonials. Testimonials can be easily faked and patients can be coerced into providing testimonials by being given discounts for services or other enticements. Legitimate health care providers don't use testimonials as they are unreliable and threaten the client's confidentiality.

When you have concerns about your child's physical or mental health, don't trust treatments and interventions where the providers guarantee the results or use testimonials. Those are usually the first clues that you will end up much poorer and no better off.

Biography:

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