

Hector is Dissatisfied

Once upon a time there was a young psychiatrist called Hector who was not very satisfied with himself.

Hector was not very satisfied with himself, even though he looked just like a real psychiatrist: he wore little round glasses that made him look intellectual; he knew how to listen to people sympathetically, saying 'mmm'; he even had a little moustache, which he twirled when he was thinking very hard.

Many people wanted to make an appointment with Hector, not just because he looked like a real psychiatrist, but because he had a gift that all good doctors have and that you can't simply learn at college: he really was interested in people.

The first time people go to a psychiatrist, they're often a bit embarrassed. They worry the psychiatrist will think they're mad even though they know he's used to it. Or else they worry that he won't think their case is serious enough and will tell them to take their troubles elsewhere. But since they've made the appointment and kept it, they decide to recount their odd little quirks, the strange thoughts they haven't told anyone about before but that make them unhappy, the great fears or deep sorrows that prevent them from living life to the full. They also worry that they won't express themselves properly and that they will be boring. And it must be said that sometimes psychiatrists do look bored, or tired. If you weren't used to it you might wonder if they really were listening to you.

But with Hector it was almost never like that. He looked at people as they told their story, he nodded in encouragement, made his little 'mmm-hmm' noises, twirled his moustache and sometimes he'd even say, 'Wait, explain that again. I didn't quite understand.' Except on days when he was very tired, people really felt that Hector was listening to what they had to say and finding it interesting.

He wasn't just successful because he knew how to listen to people. He also knew all the tricks of his trade.

First of all, he knew how to answer a question with another question. For example, when people asked him, 'Do you think I'm going to get better, Doctor?' he would reply: 'What does "getting better" mean to you?' In this way Hector helped people to think about their own case and find their own ways of getting better.

He also knew all about medication. In psychiatry that's quite simple since there are only four main types of medication that can be prescribed: pills to take when you're sad - anti-depressants; pills to take when you're scared - tranquillisers; pills to take when you have very strange thoughts and hear voices - anti-psychotics; and then pills to avoid highs that are too high or lows that are too low - mood stabilisers. Actually, it's a bit more

complicated than that because for each type of medication there are at least ten different brands of pill, all with funny-sounding names. Pills are a bit like sweets: not everybody likes the same ones.

And when medication wasn't enough, or when people had no need for it, Hector had another way of helping them: psychotherapy. A complicated name for simply helping people by listening and talking to them.

And so, using the tricks of his trade – medication, psychotherapy and his gift of being genuinely interested in people – Hector was quite a good psychiatrist.

And yet Hector felt dissatisfied. He felt dissatisfied because he could see perfectly well that he couldn't make people happy.

Hector has Doubts

Hector's practice was in a city full of wide avenues lined with attractive old buildings. This city differed from most of the world's big cities: the inhabitants had plenty to eat; if they were ill they could receive free medical treatment; children went to school, and most people had a job. They could also go to lots of different showings at the cinema that weren't too expensive; there were museums, swimming pools and even special places to ride bicycles without being run over. People could also watch lots of different TV channels, read all sorts of newspapers, and journalists were free to write almost whatever they wanted. People had plenty of time off, even though this could be a problem for those who didn't have enough money to go away on holiday.

Because, although everything worked better than in most of the world's big cities, there were still some people who had only just enough money to live on, and some children who couldn't stand school and behaved very badly, or didn't even have parents to look after them any more. There were also grown-ups who were out of work and who were so unhappy that they tried to make themselves feel better by drinking anything and everything or by taking very bad pills. But those people didn't live in the type of neighbourhood where Hector worked. Hector knew they existed because he had treated a lot of them when he worked at the hospital. And since then, he'd continued going to the hospital every Wednesday instead of going to his practice. And that's where he saw people like Roger, for example, whom he asked, 'Have you been taking your medication, Roger?'

'Yes, yes, the Lord is my shepherd, He leadeth me.'

'I'm sure he does, but have you been taking your medication?'

'Yes, yes, the Lord is my shepherd, He leadeth me.'

You see, Roger believed that the Good Lord talked to him constantly, what they call hearing voices, and he would reply out loud. What's wrong with that? you may ask. The problem was that when Roger didn't take his medication, he would talk to himself in the street – sometimes in a very loud voice if he'd had a drink – and unkind people would laugh at him. As he was quite a big fellow this occasionally ended in trouble, and Roger would find himself back in the psychiatric hospital for a long time.

Roger had a lot of other problems: he'd never had a mother and father to look after him, he hadn't done well at school, and since he'd begun talking to the Good Lord nobody wanted to employ him. And so Hector,

together with a lady from social services, had filled in loads of forms so that Roger could stay in his tiny studio flat in a neighbourhood you wouldn't necessarily have wanted to live in.

At Hector's practice it was very different from the hospital: the people who came to see him there had done quite well at school, had been brought up by a mother and a father, and had a job. Or if they lost their job they quite easily found another. They generally dressed nicely and knew how to tell their story without making grammatical errors and the women were often quite pretty (which was sometimes a problem for Hector).

Some of them had real disorders or had suffered real misfortune, and in this case Hector generally succeeded in treating them using psychotherapy and medication. But a lot of them had no real disorders – or at least none that Hector had learnt to treat when he was a student – and hadn't suffered any real misfortune either – like having unkind parents or losing somebody really close to them. And yet, these people weren't happy.

Take Adeline, for example, quite an attractive young woman whom Hector saw quite often.

'How are you?' Hector would ask.

'Are you hoping that one day I'll say: "Very well"?'

'Why do you think I'd hope that?'

'You must be getting rather fed up with my problems.'

She wasn't far wrong, even though Hector was actually quite fond of Adeline. She was successful in her work which was to sell things – that's to say, she knew how to sell things for a lot more than they were worth, and consequently her bosses were delighted and often gave her large bonuses.

And yet she never stopped complaining, especially about men. As she was really rather charming, she always had a man in her life, but it never worked out: either they were nice but she didn't find them very exciting; or they were exciting but she didn't find them particularly nice, or they were neither nice nor exciting and she wondered why she was with them at all. She had found a way of making the exciting men nicer and that was by leaving them. But then, of course, they weren't exciting any more either. In addition, all these men were successful, because if a man wasn't successful he didn't stand a chance with Adeline.

Just by asking Adeline questions, Hector tried to make her understand that the height of happiness did not necessarily come from having the most excitement with a very successful man who is also very nice (especially as you can imagine how easy it is to find a very successful man who is also very nice!) But it was difficult, Adeline had very high standards.

Hector had quite a few patients like Adeline.

He also saw men who thought like Adeline: they wanted the most exciting woman who was also successful and nice. And at work it was the same: they wanted a very important job, but one that would allow them the freedom to 'fulfil themselves' – as some of them put it. Even when they were successful in their jobs they still wondered whether they wouldn't have been much happier doing something else.

Basically, all of these well-dressed people said that they didn't like their lives, they questioned their choice of profession, they wondered whether they were married or nearly married to the right person, they had the impression that they were missing out on something important in life, that time was passing and they couldn't be everything that they wanted to be.

They weren't happy, and it was no joke because some of them had thoughts of suicide, and Hector had to pay special attention to them.

He began wondering whether he didn't attract that particular type of person. Perhaps there was something about his way of talking which they

especially liked? Or about the way he twirled his moustache as he looked at them, or even about his Hindu statuettes? Which was why they passed on his address, and more and more of them turned up at his practice. He casually asked his more experienced colleagues if they only treated people with real disorders. Hector's colleagues looked at him as if he'd asked rather a silly question. Of course they didn't only treat people with real disorders! They also saw a lot of people who were dissatisfied with their lives and who felt unhappy. And from what they told him, Hector understood that they didn't have much more success than him.

What was even stranger was that in those neighbourhoods where most people were much more fortunate than people living elsewhere, there were more psychiatrists than in all the other neighbourhoods put together, and every month new ones arrived! In fact, if you looked at a world map of psychiatrists (they're very hard to find so don't even try), you'd see that in countries like the one where Hector lived, there were far more psychiatrists than in the rest of the world, where there were nevertheless far more people.

That was all very interesting, but it was of no use to Hector. He felt that he wasn't helping these unhappy people. Even though they liked coming back to see him, he was finding it more and more of a strain. He had noticed that he was far more tired after seeing people who were dissatisfied with their lives than after seeing patients like Roger. And since he was seeing more and more people who were unhappy for no apparent reason, he was becoming more and more tired, and even a little unhappy himself. He began to wonder whether he was in the right profession, whether he was happy with his life, whether he wasn't missing out on something. And then he felt very afraid because he wondered whether these unhappy people were contagious. He even thought about taking pills himself (he knew some of his colleagues took them), but on reflection he decided that it wasn't a good solution.

One day Madame Irina said to him, 'Doctor, I can see that you're very tired.'

'Oh, I'm sorry if it shows.'

'You should take a holiday, it would do you good.'

Hector thought that this was a good idea: why didn't he go on holiday?

But being a conscientious young man, he would plan his holiday so that it would help him to become a better psychiatrist. He would take what they call a busman's holiday. And so he decided to take a trip around the world, and everywhere he went he would try to understand what made people happy or unhappy. That way, he told himself, if there was a secret of happiness, he'd be sure to find it.