

## What Therapy Is and What It Is Not

Psychotherapy is a relationship between you and your therapist, which is devoted to your well-being and growth. Relieving your pain, reducing your symptoms, or changing your behavior or lifestyle may be parts of that goal. The only direct benefit to the therapist is the fee, which you will pay. It is never your responsibility to take care of your therapist's needs, health, or well-being, other than to pay the fee.

The main way we achieve the goals of psychotherapy is talking together. Sometimes other kinds of "expression", such as doing art, playing (most often used with children) or writing a journal can be used. Other methods (such as hypnotherapy, relaxation training, meditation, and so on) may be suggested, but your therapist will use only approaches to which you agree. You have the right to be informed and to understand the purposes, activities, risks and reasonable chances of success of any approach.

Psychotherapy (or "therapy") is not physical, that is, we do not ordinarily touch one another. It is not directly spiritual, that is, as therapists we do not advocate particular brands or approaches to spirituality, although we do consider spirituality important. It is not necessarily about past memories, although it can be. Basically, therapy is about you striving to know yourself better and finding ways to resolve your problems and live more happily in the world.

We think of therapy as present and future-oriented, although some forays into understanding the past may be needed and beneficial. Although nothing can undo the past, we agree that those who are unaware of their past are condemned to repeat it.

Therapy cannot protect you from real-life dangers, oppressive circumstances, and threats. It can assist you in evaluating and problem-solving them. Therapy cannot rescue you from danger or evil persons. It can help you learn to recognize them and to avoid them. Therapy cannot simply end your unhappy story, but it can strengthen you to compose a new story.

Therapy is often hard work. You will learn to pay attention to your thoughts, your feelings, and your relationships; to honestly acknowledge them (including feeling you wish you never had); to work with unwanted aspects of yourself, to learn to feel painful things and to face ugly realities; to talk candidly and respectfully with people you would rather avoid; to accept impossible but inevitable situations; to change frightening but changeable ones; to face one's inner monsters and to learn to love the outer ones-or to name and run away from them! The therapist does not do this work.

The therapist's job is to listen carefully, to point out strengths that have been unnoticed and weaknesses that have been ignored, to look for hope when you are hopeless and danger when you are naïve, to allow you to be dependent when you fear depending and to challenge you to grow up when you would love to stay little. In short, the therapist's job is to assist you to learn to meet your needs, satisfy your desires, and live more freely in this world.

## **Goals of Therapy**

The chief overall goal of therapy is to help you to become better able to meet your needs, satisfy your desires, and live more freely in this world. Happiness, “feeling better”, or similar states are not necessarily the goal, although they may be appropriate by-products.

Some health insurance companies may insist that “problem reduction” or “symptom relief” is the only appropriate therapy goals. These are minimum goals. Authentic psychotherapy can be more than that. We will help you in achieving symptom relief, but it is not our only interest. However, as the client, your interests are the main focus of psychotherapy.

Psychotherapy cannot reverse history. If you were abused or hurt in the past, it obviously cannot be undone. We believe it is the current effects or past experiences, which can be changed. This comes from our belief that psychotherapy aims to help you do two major things:

**To change**, primarily your ways of meeting your needs and seeking your pleasure in the world.

**To strengthen**, primarily your “self” (that is, your capacity for choice, resilience, and adaptation to the demands of the real world).

Some problems and sufferings are physical, or are made worse by physical pain. Therapy can be greatly assisted by medication, by exercise, and by bodily self-care.

Some problems and suffering are beyond therapy. Therapy can help you identify its own limits, and support you in the search for greater meaning and resources.

## **Known Benefits of Psychotherapy**

Research has shown that most of the common approaches to therapy are about equally successful. In general, the typical psychotherapy clients are better off after therapy than they were before it, and they are better off after therapy than 80% of untreated persons. This means that you may have about a 20% chance of feeling better if you simply wait a few months or a couple of years. Of course, statistics are usually more complicated than that. You should know that there is a 5% chance that therapy may make you feel worse. A study by *Consumer Reports* said that typical clients in typical kinds of therapy for long enough periods of time actually find significant improvement. Generally speaking, the longer one stays in therapy the more the improvements on experiences.

Therapy is very helpful when the client is depressed, anxious, unhappy, a survivor of trauma, or suffering from a life-problem which requires carefully thinking and involves lots of emotional energy. People who can talk and listen reasonably well, who are reasonably comfortable being alone with another person, and who are willing to pay attention to their own feelings, thoughts, and motivations probably will do well in psychotherapy. Often, psychotherapy can be enhanced by medications designed to decrease depression or anxiety symptoms. If so your therapist will discuss this with you.

Psychotherapy has been shown to help people who are passive to become more assertive, and to feel better because more of their needs are met. It has been shown to help people with high anxiety to feel calmer and to become more able to calm themselves down. People who are depressed often are helped a great deal, especially to identify and change the ideas and beliefs, which may contribute to their depression. Of course, none of these people are helped if they do not pay attention to their actual feelings and thoughts and talk them over candidly with the therapist. Nor are they helped if they refuse to change anything in their attitudes or their behaviors.

People who are helped by psychotherapy typically report that they feel less unhappy, that their physical sense of well-being is improved (for example, their appetites improve, their sleep habits improve, they have more satisfying sexual lives and often their general health improves). People with chronic pain problems may not have less pain, but they often report feeling more able to live productively despite the pain and to not be so distracted by it. Sometimes, especially when they use additional tools such as hypnosis, they find that even their level of pain might decrease at least some.

### **Common Risks Associated with Psychotherapy**

There are risks to psychotherapy. The first and most important one is that people often feel worse as the therapy progresses. Sometimes this is natural; after all, talking about problems breaks down our usual avoidance of them and the pain associated with them can then be felt more vividly. In some cases, however the worsening is due to mistakes on the therapist's part, such as moving into painful material before the client is actually ready. In this case, recognizing the problem and "slowing down" usually takes care of the worsening.

It is very important to let your therapist know how you are experiencing the therapy. If it seems to be making you feel worse, maybe it is. Telling your therapist allows exploration of what is happening, so you can decide whether the worsening is to be expected or whether the therapy is moving too fast.

Some clients develop strong feelings about their therapists. This, especially in longer therapies, is normal, even if it is sometimes uncomfortable. Any feelings are possible, and the rule for them all is to talk them over with the therapist. You should never feel ashamed or humiliated by your therapist for anything that you discuss in therapy. If you do, inform your therapist. Perhaps the feeling comes from you, but therapists must take great care not to intentionally shame or humiliate their clients. If your therapist continues to humiliate you intentionally, find a different therapist.

Therapy can complicate your life. After all, you may discover that you have feelings about people, which you never realized you had. You may want or need things you had overlooked, and may not have access to them yet. You may have had experiences in the past, which must be reconciled, and sometimes that is cumbersome.

Of course, the fee you must pay for therapy can pose a risk to you financially. You should carefully consider the fee and your ability to pay it over the entire estimated

course of therapy before you begin, lest you find halfway through that you can neither stop nor pay the fee. Usually, health insurance or managed cost companies (HMO's) will pay some portion of the fee; but they may stop payment at certain limits, after which you will be responsible for the entire fee. Will that pose an unacceptable financial burden? If you need to continue therapy at that time, this will cause significant distress to you.

When clients cannot stay in conscious connection with their feelings, thoughts, or behavior, psychotherapy is not as helpful. The risk is that it might make them feel worse, or cause anxiety. In general, if the requirements of psychotherapy (such as talking, listening, being able to reasonably feel safe with the therapist, being able to learn from discussion with someone, and so on) cannot be met, psychotherapy poses a risk of making the client at least waste time and money, and at worse of becoming worse.

Psychotherapy can also help with marriage and relationship problems. However, you should know that some research suggests that when one spouse or partner meets alone with a therapist to discuss problems involving the other partner, although it may help the person in therapy, the chances of separation increases.

The therapist can also offer suggestions and advice when they are appropriate, but you must know that research shows that a therapist's advice about life problems is often no more helpful than that of other persons. Helping you find your own solutions is far more important a job of the therapist than telling you what the therapist's solutions is.

### **Risks Associated with Memories**

Since therapy depends on talking about your experiences, even in the past, your memory is involved, and memory is not always completely dependable. There are two main risks in therapy regarding memories: first is to take memories as being too dependable (as if memories were always accurate): and second is to take memories as being too fallible (as if no memories from the distant past are reliable). In fact, the truth is usually in between.

If you assume your memories are always accurate, therapy can be risky, especially in cases of alleged abuse. Memory of abuse is often unclear, vague, fragmented, or seemingly absurd. There is strong evidence that extremely traumatic memory is not stored like normal memories, and may be recalled in fragments, images, and sensations without logical stories attached.

### **Risk Associated with Diagnosis**

Every good therapist makes some kind of "diagnosis" of your problems. This means that there is a "summing up" which describes in shorthand what is wrong and what is going to be the target of therapy. Even saying, "You are unhappy because you lost your job" is a form of diagnosis. Psychiatric diagnosis are condensed phrases which tell what your symptoms are and what the therapist assumes to be the cause(s) of your difficulties. The risk of making the wrong diagnosis is that the wrong treatment will follow.

The benefit of making any diagnosis is that therapy has a much better chance to succeed when it has a reasonable focus, which a good diagnosis can provide.

To avoid the risks of misdiagnosis, be sure that the therapist knows the whole story. Tell the truth as well as you can, and if something occurs to you, tell the therapist. Therapists are supposed to take complete histories, and to consider carefully what medical problems might be causing your symptoms. All this is to help them make the proper diagnosis. If you have any concern that the therapist does not sufficiently know or understand your situation, don't hesitate to stop the process and say so. In this way, you can help avoid a misdiagnosis and the wrong decisions about treatment.

Another risk associated with diagnosis is that your diagnosis, if you use medical insurance of any form, becomes quasi-public knowledge. Insurance companies insist that you be given a psychiatric diagnosis and this diagnosis will be a permanent part of your medical record. These records are available to any insurance company you apply to in the future. It is difficult to guarantee your privacy under such conditions.

We strongly recommend that you not discuss your diagnosis with anyone except your therapist and your most trusted associates. Employers or people who do not have your best interests at heart are not appropriate persons with whom to share your diagnosis. The risk is that they may take it as a "permanent truth" something, which is in reality only a therapeutic shorthand description of something you hope to change.

Another risk associated with diagnosis is that some people are upset by it. Some people do not understand it and some people feel ashamed of their diagnosis. Please ask anything and everything you need in order to understand and accept your diagnosis. If you feel ashamed or belittled by it, talk this over until the feelings become manageable. No diagnosis needs to be a permanent, life-long prison sentence. One of the early hurdles in therapy is arriving at an accurate and helpful diagnosis and then helping the client become educated and reasonably comfortable about it.

### **Other Risks Associated with Therapy**

Unexpressed feelings about any of the "rules" of therapy can derail your progress. If you resent paying the fee or wish for longer sessions, please tell your therapist of these feelings. Even if nothing can be done to change the situation, the feelings can change if they are discussed.

Therapists are required by ethics codes and by the law never to have an outside relationship with their clients, including any form of sexual relationship. Even semi-sexual touching is forbidden. The privacy, intimacy, and personal nature of therapy sometimes can make feelings quite strong between a therapist and a client. If this happens, tell your therapist immediately. If your therapist does not respond in a way you can be comfortable with, you can stop therapy and notify proper authorities.

Sometimes problems that were not apparent to you at the start emerge during therapy. When this happens, it is discussed between therapist and client and a new treatment plan is developed to solve them, or they are not addressed. Sometimes, present problems, which seem minor become larger and must be addressed. Again, a new treatment plan

will be developed if that should happen, and nothing will be done without your full consent.

**No Absolute Guarantees**

Based on experimental research, there are no guarantees that therapy will help you get better. Based on over a century of consistent clinical experience, we know that therapy helps many people achieve meaningful improvement in their lives. We have found five variables to be predictive of success: (1) When the therapist is comfortable with and believes in what he or she is doing; (2) When therapist and client share a collaborative relationship in which they respect each other and feel a positive bond; (3) When the client is allowed to talk freely and feel emotions fully; (4) When the therapist is well-trained, has experience, and competently uses skills known to be helpful; (5) When there is enough empathy between the two that the client feels safe and supported in taking risks and accepting the therapist’s challenges or confrontations.

Though we cannot guarantee that therapy will help you, and would remind you that there is a slight chance (5% or less) that it might make you worse, we believe that it is quite likely to help you at least to overcome your immediate problems or symptoms and to feel well enough to live more productively.

I have read and understand this document, and I am satisfied with the explanation and conversation I have had about it with my therapist. I understand that I am free to stop therapy at any time.

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Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date