

Understanding how therapy works

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I have found that when clients understand how therapy works then they are better able to benefit from it. When I meet with clients I do my best to provide a comprehensible explanation for what is a very complex process. Other therapists may think differently about what takes place and how therapy works. This doesn't mean that there is a right way to think about it. However, it can help if you and the therapist are on the same page and share certain perspectives and ideas about how you are most likely to benefit. If you are thinking about meeting with me to see whether I might be the right therapist for you, this article will give you an idea about how I think therapy helps people change.

When clients talk about what they want to get out of therapy they often express it in very diverse ways. Some talk about wanting to be more confident or more expressive or to feel closer to their spouse, family or friends. Others express the wish to be more successful at work or not to be hampered by fear. What I have found is that regardless of the personal ways that prospective clients have of articulating their goals, most people entering therapy share two primary aims. The first is that they want to be able to have more intimacy in their relationships and the second is that they want to feel better about themselves. These two goals are interconnected (don't we feel more secure with others when we are accepting of ourselves, and vice versa?).

Whether you are in individual, couples or group therapy, I will want to get to know you and what has happened in your life so that we can understand how you have become the person that you are. I will want to learn about the kinds of patterns that have developed in your life that are working well for you (e.g. "I never give up"; "I'm very friendly") as well as the ones that don't ("I avoid confrontations"; "I always put myself down"). This is a very important way of coming to learn about what we can build on and what habits we need to change.

Getting personal information out in the open is sometimes its own reward. People are often relieved to have troubling thoughts and feelings shared with someone in an environment where they can trust that it will be accepted rather than judged. In your life you may have noticed that even if you are thinking a lot about a problem privately, the very act of saying it out loud seems to allow for new ideas and ways of thinking and feeling about the problem to emerge. This happens in therapy, too, where the therapist, spouse and/or group become a "sounding board". Out of this process and in collaboration with me, some clearer ideas about what you can do to make changes in your life will occur. Together, we can identify how to go about making these changes and I will support you in putting these into action.

In addition, clients are given a relatively simple instruction to follow: "Try to notice what thoughts, feelings, sensations or behaviors are happening in the present moment and then to put what you notice into words". Not so complicated, but very hard to do. So what is the point of this instruction?

Most of the time we don't respond to the present moment as if it were a brand new moment, but rather we respond as if we know what is going on. We are able to do this because we can rely upon very complex patterns of thoughts, feelings, memories and sensations that some psychologists have called schemas, core beliefs or scripts (among other labels!) to guide us as to how to maneuver in the present moment. Everyone has them and we couldn't get by without them. These scripts are like a set of rules that tell us what to do right now and what to expect in the future based on what has taken place in the past. While they are efficient, they are often inaccurate because they are based on outdated information and experiences.

Some of our scripts work out just fine and often clients have areas in their lives which feel very gratifying. However, all clients have some areas in their lives which aren't working well at all and it is usually because they have developed some scripts that are successful in helping them avoid some painful experience but in doing so prevents them from having some experiences which are really important to them. An example would be the shy person whose withdrawal relieves them of the potential feeling of being exposed or embarrassed but who then feels left out or that they don't matter to people. Another example would be of a spouse who interprets the withdrawal of their mate as an indication that they are unloved and responds with anxiety and anger, causing their partner to withdraw even more.

As a client in therapy, when you say out loud what you are thinking or feeling in the present moment, you can't help but reveal the scripts which are guiding you in your life, both for better or for worse. The illumination of these scripts through interacting with the therapist, your spouse or group members is an important way of learning. You get to become familiar and "in touch" with the way your mind works. You become more aware of both your "blind spots" and your tendency to behave reactively according to your scripts, as if you were on automatic pilot. For example, one client may share that he has noticed that he agrees with the therapist out loud even when privately he is objecting. His tendency is to try and be agreeable. We may learn that this is a habit that shows up in his marriage as well, where his need for affection leads him to suppress certain thoughts and feelings, and he feels cut off from himself and resentful towards his wife.

I really wish that becoming aware of these scripts or habits of mind was all there was to it. I wish it were so that "the truth will set you free". However, once these habits of mind are stored in our brains they tend to stick around. Even if you develop new ones, the old ones still make appearances. This is why in addition to becoming aware of these habits of mind it is important to learn how to not "believe" the messages contained in them. For example, the man described above "believed" that if he were to assert himself he would be unloved and alone. There are a wide range of techniques to help clients learn how to not believe the stories their minds tell them. Over time, the experience of being in therapy in an atmosphere of acceptance, curiosity and respect, allows one to notice that certain scripts are no longer good fits for what is happening now. Getting feedback or having experiences that illuminate other ways of understanding oneself and others is also a crucial way to get unstuck. Some "mindfulness" techniques can also be explicitly taught as ways to be able to look at one's thoughts and feelings without having to buy into them.

One final emphasis in therapy is upon doing things differently. It is not enough to talk about and learn about how to be different; one needs to have different experiences by doing things differently. This could include practicing noticing some positive things about yourself and your spouse, taking the risk to speak your mind or intentionally taking the others point of view. This aspect of therapy is a focus on moving from being reactive to being responsive. The client learns to be aware of their intentions and to act upon those intentions. The focus is upon choosing how one is going to be in the world.

Life is, unfortunately, full of painful experiences. People can treat us in ways that are upsetting and our habits sometimes trip us up. However, if we can learn to master our reactions to what is happening around us and in our minds, we can develop new habits that are more effective in creating happiness in our lives. It is unavoidable that we will be faced with disappointments and pain, but whether or not we get stuck in suffering is something we can change.

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