

Make Every Session Count: How Does Therapy Help?

From Isolation to Contact



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From Isolation to Contact

SHARED PAIN IS easier to bear.

Well now, that depends on how your sharing is received by others. Sometimes opening up to another person can make matters worse, as is the case when the other person responds to the expression of emotion by *judging*. In contrast, sharing when responded to with *acceptance* and *support* can contribute much to the healing process. In this chapter we'll take a look at some helpful and some not-so-helpful conditions for sharing your pain.

Good Therapists Don't Judge

They do, however, offer honest feedback...and a trained therapist knows the difference.

Friends sometimes will judge your feelings or actions in the name of "honest feedback." Their intentions may be constructive, but the result can be very destructive. Sometimes such judging is blatant; sometimes it is subtle, but it's almost never helpful.

Let's look at some examples:

Obvious Judgment

"You should be ashamed of yourself."

"You're being too emotional, too sensitive."

Disguised Judgment

"Now, now, don't cry."

"Look on the bright side."

"You need to put it behind you and get on with your life."

The obvious or underlying message implied is judgment: "It's wrong to feel that way" or "There is something wrong with you." In response, the person in pain may begin to feel ashamed or inadequate, and shut down

emotionally. She is likely to become increasingly inhibited about sharing her inner feelings, further cutting her off from connections with others. In such cases, sharing is hurtful rather than healing.

Other Types of Nonhelpful Sharing

Some listeners can't wait to jump in and offer brilliant insights or good advice. Sometimes this response is helpful, but often it is not. In fact, it generally closes the door to deeper emotional sharing.

"It takes two to speak the truth—one to speak and another to hear."
—Henry David Thoreau

Other listeners will attempt to convince you—and themselves—that they understand. True understanding is hard to achieve. When the listener quickly, or in a phony, shallow way says, "I understand," it's usually a type of non-helpful sharing. People are so unique and so complex in their makeup that to come even close to a state of true understanding requires a lot of listening and a good deal of time spent coming to know the other person. The friend who says, "I understand," is probably trying to be helpful and trying to express care and concern. However, the person sharing her pain often thinks, "How can she really understand?" The result again is a closing down of emotions and a reluctance to share.

Brief therapy offers a safe place to share emotional experiences and feelings with another person in a nonjudgmental and supportive atmosphere.

Benefits of Positive Sharing

When sharing pain with another person, you may experience strong emotions that otherwise would seem completely overwhelming. The other person can be like an anchor, providing some degree of stability and strength, lessening the intensity of your emotions.

A crisis may call up a host of emotions, some too intense, some too shameful to handle alone. An extremely valuable consequence of having the opportunity to discuss your feelings with a therapist is feeling okay about having human emotions. As a person listens to and accepts you, you may begin to feel less guilt, less shame, and disturbing emotions begin to seem normal and understandable. Many people are afraid that others will be disgusted, shocked, or critical when they reveal deep inner feelings. But a tremendous sense of relief can result when you see that another person hears you and does not condemn you.

Sharing pain with another also gives you a chance to talk out loud about your feelings. We discussed the value of talking in Chapter 8. People can, and do, talk to themselves, of course, but talking is more effective when another person listens. It's an easier way to notice more clearly just what you're thinking, and how you're feeling.

Finally, and very importantly, sharing allows you simply to *be with another human being during a time of distress*. Most people feel any life crisis more acutely in isolation. Being in contact with a therapist, a close friend, loved one—even a stranger who is a good listener—can be soothing and healing.

Sharing pain connects us to one another. Compassion and love play an important role in the healing process.

Finally...

Brief psychotherapy isn't just talk, or chitchat. It's not hand-holding or an emotional crutch. It is important, emotionally difficult work, and a serious endeavor. Psychotherapy, when the chemistry is right between client and therapist, helps people help themselves during hard times. Therapy is no longer seen so much as a cure for emotional illness as it is an effective way to facilitate growth, encourage effective coping, and provide support when life is hard. Ultimately, psychotherapy works only when it helps people find their own strength.