

*Make Every Session Count: What is Brief Therapy?*

# What Are Therapists Like?



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## What Are Therapists Like?

THERAPISTS ARE human beings.

"Obviously," you may say. But some folks seem to think that therapy is an art, practiced by individuals with X-ray vision and wise advice for every problem. The fact is that therapists are highly trained experts in human behavior who are just as vulnerable as the rest of the population to all of the realities of being human.

In this chapter, we'll review the characteristics that allow a professional therapist to offer that special "helping relationship" that assists people in making sense of their lives during stressful times.

### What Makes Therapists Different?

*Therapists generally don't give advice.* Many people can benefit from helpful suggestions and good advice from time to time, but such input is readily available from friends and relatives (even when you don't want it). Truth be told, most therapists aren't really any better at giving commonsense advice than anyone else. But they can and do provide a kind of help not readily found in your ordinary network of family and friends.

- *Therapists are trained to understand emotional distress and the process of emotional healing.* In a sense they are people who understand the general terrain of the human landscape, and can help guide people through painful times toward growth and healing.

Good therapists have learned to be fully present with their patients ... to transmit an attitude of respect, understanding, and acceptance.

- *Therapists are willing and able to face very strong emotions.*

It's hard to really be with someone when they are experiencing intense feelings. To witness a human suffering in itself is difficult. It is also hard for many people to experience another's pain without it touching on their own inner feelings. Good therapists have learned to handle these issues: to be fully present with their clients, resonate with their pain, but also maintain an appropriate objectivity. A client is able to express strong feelings and knows that the therapist cares, yet is not overwhelmed or blown away by the powerful emotions. This provides a considerable amount of stability and safety

within the therapy hour.

- *Good therapists tend to be nonjudgmental.* They understand that most interpersonal and emotional problems can be seen as attempts to emotionally survive the common problems in living. Effective therapists transmit an attitude of respect, understanding, and acceptance. In psychotherapy outcome studies, the most commonly reported factor judged to have been helpful to clients was the therapist's ability to genuinely care and to understand the client. The therapist's compassionate attitude helps the client to reduce excessive self-criticism and develop an enhanced capacity for self-acceptance.
- *Therapists provide support for self-expression.* Support and encouragement of honest expression helps shore up and solidify the development of the self. To use an analogy, when building a concrete wall, boards are used to provide support for the concrete as it begins to harden. At some point the boards can be removed and the wall is solid; the concrete has developed its own strength and it can stand on its own. In therapy, it begins to feel okay to talk openly about how things really are. Although reduction of emotional distress (decreased depression, anxiety, tension, etc.) is a primary goal for most people entering treatment, one of the most common results of psychotherapy is an increased sense of self and self-esteem. "When my therapist really listens, I know it's okay to be me!"
- *Therapists help clients to maintain a sense of realistic hope during difficult times.* Not the phony "Everything will be all right" hope, but a realistic perspective and trust in the process that psychotherapy will very likely lead to healing or better coping skills.
- *Therapists do not repeat maladaptive patterns of interaction.* Many relationships involve patterns. A dependent, seemingly helpless person may frequently enter into relationships where her behavior leads others to treat her like a child. This repetitive "interpersonal dance" may feel good at first (because it is familiar), but ultimately contributes to keeping her stuck; she never grows up. The tendency for others to rush in and rescue this "helpless" person keeps her stuck in an infantile position. A good therapist would empathize with her distress, but would resist the urge to treat her like a helpless child. The therapist's refusal to perpetuate the dance allows this client to grow

and come to feel her own strength.

## What You Can Expect from the Therapist

All competent psychotherapists are committed to a code of ethics and a standard of practice that attempts to assure the following (essential ingredients in a helping relationship):

- Provide privacy and confidentiality.<sup>1</sup>
- Treat clients in a decent and respectful manner.
- Gain the client's informed consent for any procedures undertaken in the course of therapy.
- Provide realistic emotional support.
- Help you feel at ease during the first meetings. Many people are worried about the first session: "I won't know what to say or where to start," "I feel anxious about talking to someone I don't know." These concerns are common and understandable; it's normal to feel nervous during the first session. Effective therapists know how to help people get started talking.
- Provide a "neutral," noncritical, and nonjudgmental environment. An important goal in therapy is not to judge people, but to understand and be helpful.
- To be honest. Your therapist is there to help you fully understand yourself, your patterns of behavior, and your feelings. The therapist's function is to provide honest and objective feedback about your attitudes and actions. The feedback will feel good when it recognizes your strengths and it may feel uncomfortable when it points out your weaknesses. Brief therapy can help you capitalize on your strengths and transform your weaknesses. The process may be uncomfortable at times, but the outcome may be positive, even more than you expect.
- Maintain a professional relationship. This is what psychotherapists refer to as "maintaining appropriate professional boundaries." It is a part of the therapists' ethical codes to assure that therapy remains safe. In the practice of psychotherapy, relating to a patient in other-than-

professional ways—socially, romantically, or entering into a business relationship—is inappropriate, and may be unethical or illegal. Sexually intimate relationships are absolutely prohibited by the professional codes of ethics (and the law in most states). Social friendships outside the therapy hour and business deals are unwise, and may also be unethical.

- Make appropriate referrals. Sometimes your therapist may need to refer you to a medical doctor, for a psychiatric evaluation and possible medication treatment. They may refer you to another therapist who offers particular services, (marital counseling), or support groups or programs when appropriate (Alcoholics Anonymous, bereavement support groups, etc.). Your therapist may even refer you to another therapist if both of you feel that the current therapy isn't working.
- Provide information about the therapist's education and training, fees, type of services offered, and responses to any number of relevant questions regarding the treatment they provide.

## Types of Mental Health Therapists

*Psychiatrists (M.D.):* Psychiatrists are medical doctors who have received specialized training in the treatment of emotional problems, including both medication and psychological treatments. (It is possible for a physician to practice psychiatry without specialized training; however, very few do so.) Most psychiatrists treat emotional disorders with medications. Some psychiatrists also provide psychotherapy, behavior therapy, or cognitive therapy.

*Psychologists:* Almost all hold a doctorate degree in psychology (Ph.D., Psy.D., Ed.D.), have a number of years of postgraduate training in psychological methods, and in most states are licensed or certified to practice. They also have specialized training in the administration and interpretation of psychological tests.

*Clinical Social Workers:* Generally hold a master's degree (M.S.W.), have considerable supervised experience and are usually licensed by the state ("L.C.S.W."—Licensed Clinical Social Worker).

*Marriage Family and Child Counselors/Therapists:* A number of states grant a license or certificate to marriage, family and child counselors (or marriage, family and child therapists). Such therapists generally have at least a master's degree in counseling (M.S. or M.A.), usually with specialization in treatment of marriage and family problems and the treatment of children and adolescents.



*Pastoral Counselors:* Some clergy have received training in counseling and may provide supportive therapy to members of their church or to others desiring a therapist who addresses both emotional and spiritual concerns.

### Getting the Most from Your Therapist

- *The chemistry has to be "good enough."* You need to feel a degree of comfort and compatibility with your therapist. Not all people are going to make a good connection. It may not be essential to feel 100 percent comfortable with your therapist, but it is quite important to feel the following: a basic sense of trust, the perception that you and your feelings are being treated with respect, and some degree of confidence that your therapist is competent. First and foremost competent therapists, beyond being well-trained and skilled, need to be good, decent people.
- *The type of treatment must be appropriate.* Not all problems are best approached in the same manner. A good therapist will evaluate your situation and within the first session or two talk with you about what kind of treatment they recommend. Some types of emotional problems are due, either in part or in full, to medical/biochemical disturbances. Medical treatment and/or psychiatric medication treatment may be helpful or even necessary (see chapter 18).
- *The treatment must do no harm.* Any approach that is powerful enough to help can be powerful enough to cause harm, if in the hands of an incompetent or destructive therapist. Most licensed therapists are well trained and are helpful to most of their clients. However, as in any other profession, incompetence and/or unethical behavior does exist. *You are entitled to competent and ethical treatment.* Anything else should be reported to appropriate institutional or regulatory agencies.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> In most states laws regarding confidentiality are limited; i.e., there are certain instances when confidentiality does not apply. See Appendix A for specifics on confidentiality.

