

Make Every Session Count: What is Brief Therapy?

What's Therapy Like?

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What's Therapy Like?

IT'S NOT WHAT you think.

You've had glimpses of psychotherapy in books, in the movies, and on television. Forget that. It's not likely that what you've seen has prepared you for what really goes on.

If you're like most folks, you're thinking about therapy because you're experiencing significant distress or emotional pain—perhaps desperation—in your life. (Almost no one goes to therapy for the small stuff.) Under such times of great stress and personal uncertainty, everyone wants and needs to feel safe, and to feel some assurance that the decision to see a therapist was the right one.

Most people have lots of questions about this business of telling their troubles to a total stranger:

"What actually happens in therapy?"

"What can I expect to get from therapy?"

"What are realistic and attainable benefits I might gain from therapy?"

"Is there a reasonable chance of getting the help I need?"

"Will it be worth the time, money, effort, and emotional investment to become involved in a course of brief therapy?"

Good questions! In the following chapters we are going to offer you some straight talk about psychotherapy, and present how some people benefit from their experience of brief therapy. As we address your expectations, we'll focus on three topics: what's expected of you, what actually happens during therapy sessions, and in the next chapter, what therapists are really like.

What's Expected of You

You may be asked to fill out a background questionnaire to help the therapist determine if treatment with you is appropriate, and as a means of learning details of your history (educational history, number of people in your family, prior psychotherapy experiences, medical history...).

- You will be asked to do your best at sharing openly your particular concerns, thoughts, and feelings.
- You may be asked to complete assigned and agreed tasks—homework assignments—outside the therapy hour. (More about this in chapter 16.)
- You will be expected to show up for sessions as scheduled and to pay agreed-upon professional fees. And to give advance notice in case of a cancellation (except in cases of last-minute emergencies).
- You may be asked to complete one or more psychological tests to help your therapist assess your personal situation and needs.

What Actually Happens during Therapy Sessions?

Therapy sessions vary, depending on who you are, what current problems you're experiencing, and the kind of therapist you hire. We can, however, give you a summary glimpse of the "typical" course of brief therapy.

PHASE ONE: Getting Acquainted and Discussing What Concerns You Most. Effective therapists often help the therapy process get under way by asking their clients, "What are the main reasons you've decided to come to therapy?" or "I'd like to know what's most on your mind and what you'd like to accomplish in coming to therapy." The early sessions generally are designed to help you feel more at ease and begin discussing your main problems or concerns. At this beginning phase, many people entering therapy are unclear about what they are feeling, or they may be selfcritical, for example, "I shouldn't be feeling this way." You and your therapist will be forming a "therapeutic alliance"—a working partnership that will help you get past your uncertainty and reach your goals in therapy.

PHASE TWO: Finding a Focus. As the discussion continues in further sessions, your therapist will do a lot of listening and ask questions to help you pinpoint a major focus—the major issue or problem you'll be dealing with in therapy. You and your therapist will identify specific problems, and find out in what ways these issues are especially important to you at this time in your life.

Psychotherapy (brief or long-term) doesn't provide a quick fix. In fact, people may find that they feel somewhat worse during the first couple of sessions—at least more keenly aware of distressing feelings. And the reality often is that once a person begins to take a close look at difficult issues, emotional pain may be felt more intensely. If this happens to you, *don't bail out!* It's natural, normal, and fairly predictable—but an essential part of coming to terms with life issues that hurt. Fortunately for most, emotional distress at some point subsides as they begin to get a

handle on life problems and cope more effectively.

PHASE THREE: Refocusing or Tuning into the Problem. A common experience during the third phase of brief therapy is for clients to begin to understand their problems, and themselves, in a new light. Many times this involves a change of perspective and attitude. Such "problems" as being oversensitive to criticism, feeling taken advantage of by others, missing a loved one who has died, feeling overwhelmed and frustrated at work, start to seem more "understandable." The problems may seem just as painful, undesirable, or frustrating; however, many folks start to think, "My feelings make sense to me now" or "Of course I feel this way." The volume gets turned down on harsh self-criticism.

Attitudes Can Shift during Therapy

From	To
This is crazy.	I don't like the way this feels.
I shouldn't be so upset.	I'm upset. What can I do about it?
This shouldn't be happening!	I don't want this to happen, but it is and it's upsetting.
I'm confused. What the hell is the matter with me?	Of course I feel this way!

PHASE FOUR: Action-Oriented Skills...Practice, Practice, Practice. "I am more aware of what I feel and I don't condemn myself so harshly. But I still feel bad. What do I do next?"

Often in brief therapy, once the major problems or concerns have been clarified, the focus is shifted toward active problem solving. Kimberly, for example, learned ways to reduce anxiety by providing inner support for herself prior to taking an exam at school. Roberto developed assertive ways to communicate his feelings and needs to his wife. In one of his therapy sessions, Doug carefully planned out just how he was going to approach his shop foreman to share concerns he had about his work environment. Sherri began to write in her personal journal, discovered more about her own feelings, and learned to give herself permission to grieve the loss of her brother.

Brief therapy became a place for these people to think things through, come to conclusions regarding actions they wanted to take, learn some new coping skills, and practice these skills during the session. As Roberto said, "Having a therapist is kinda like having a coach. You can plan out what you want to do, practice it, get some feedback, refine it, and then get the extra push you need to do it for real in your life."

PHASE FIVE: Fine Timing. In the final stages of brief therapy, it is often helpful to summarize what's happened. It helps to be clear about several points:

- This was my problem
- I came to see it as understandable...not "crazy"
- I felt okay about wanting to make a change
- I figured out which approaches work for me and which don't
- I felt supported by my therapist
- I put coping skills into action
- I got some results

Getting better and feeling better usually aren't just due to fate or good luck. You have to work at changing and discovering what helps.

Once you know how to cope more successfully you're better prepared for the next time life becomes difficult.

Of course, it's not all this simple! Experiences vary. But the phases we've talked about here describe a common experience in brief therapy. Most people who succeed in therapy typically don't feel ultimately "cured" or "fixed," but they do feel better. They leave therapy knowing that they've done some *real work*, and it was *their effort* that paid off. In particular, the most common outcome of successful brief therapy is feeling okay about who you are!

Some of the specific results you may realistically expect from brief therapy are discussed in Chapter 7. But first, let's take a look at this person we call "therapist."