

What Should I Expect in Psychotherapy?

Will my therapist give me advice?

People often assume therapists give advice but that's not how therapy works. In the long run, advice is rarely helpful.

Before you came to therapy, you probably got a lot of advice. If it had really helped, you would not be coming to therapy now. Instead of advice, your therapist will help you to make better choices on your own.

What do I do in therapy?

Talk as openly as you can about whatever is on your mind, without editing or censoring yourself. This may sound easy, but it can be extremely difficult. Some thoughts will seem unimportant, some may be unpleasant or embarrassing, some may seem impolite or inappropriate (like thoughts about your therapist). Nevertheless, try to talk as openly as you can about whatever is on your mind. If you become aware something is getting in the way of speaking freely, try to talk about what's getting in the way.

How will this help me?

It can be hard to see how just talking will help, but talking is the most important thing you can do. As you talk, you will come to know yourself better and new options and possibilities will emerge. Research shows that most people benefit from therapy, including those with the most serious problems.

The benefits are not immediate. At first, there may not be an obvious connection between what you are talking about and how your problems are going to get better. It is like planting a tree. There is no obvious connection between planting seeds and eating apples—but if you plant apple seeds and tend to them, eventually there will be apples.

If you start therapy with the idea that you will try it for a session or two just to see what happens, you will likely be disappointed. That would be like planting seeds, then deciding planting seeds is useless because there are no apples the next day. Give therapy time to work.

Is therapy like talking to a friend?

It is very different. With friends, you pick and choose what you talk about. In therapy, you try to talk about whatever comes to mind without knowing in advance where your thoughts may lead.

Another difference is that friends take turns sharing information. In therapy, you will do most of the talking. Your therapist will learn a great deal about you, but you will not know nearly as much about them.

Another difference is that your therapist cannot socialize or meet with you outside of therapy appointments. They cannot accept invitations to coffee, meals, or social events. This has nothing to do with whether they would enjoy seeing you socially. It is because a therapist cannot have a social relationship with you and also be an effective therapist.

What if I am unhappy with my therapist?

When you start therapy, you should feel you can talk to your therapist and that they are interested in you and able to understand you. If you don't connect in the beginning, it is wiser to choose someone else.

As therapy continues, there will be times when you will be unhappy with your therapist. This is normal and it helps to expect it. If you are upset with your therapist, it is important to talk about what is upsetting you. This is not the time to miss appointments or end therapy. It is the time to discuss your feelings, no matter how difficult that may be.

If you have been working comfortably with your therapist and suddenly find yourself feeling angry or wanting to quit, it may mean therapy has touched on something difficult and important. This is when you will do your most important work.

If I am angry with my therapist, why should I continue?

Therapy stirs up strong feelings. At different points in therapy, you will likely have feelings toward your therapist that are similar to feelings you've had in other important relationships. This includes disappointment, hurt, and anger. Talking about these feelings is important. When you discuss your feelings toward your therapist, you will also be learning

about yourself and your relationship patterns. This is what makes it possible to recognize and rework patterns that are causing problems—so you don't have to keep repeating them.

A major difference between therapy and other relationships is that in therapy, *you talk about your feelings rather than acting on them*. For example, if you are angry with someone else, you might avoid them or try to retaliate. If you are physically attracted to someone else, you might pursue a romantic relationship. But in therapy, you *talk* about these feelings. This is how you will gain greater self-awareness. Any feelings you have are okay. The important thing is to *talk* about them.

Are therapists interested in the unconscious?

You may have heard that psychotherapists are interested in the unconscious. This is not something mysterious. It just means we do not always know why we feel and act the way we do. Your therapist's job is to help you understand.

For example, there may have been a time when you were angry with someone, out of proportion to the situation. This can happen when the person reminds you of someone else, but you don't realize it.

In this example, understanding unconscious thoughts and feelings could be as simple as remembering why you are angry and recognizing that the two people are different. Why is this important? Why does it matter? Because if you take your anger out on the wrong people, you can ruin important relationships. If, for example, the relationship is with your spouse or your boss, you may be in for a rough time.

Other people will want you to quit

As therapy proceeds, people close to you may discourage you from continuing in therapy. This often means you are changing, and the changes are confusing and troubling to the people who know you. Sometimes they will be convinced you are getting worse, just when you are starting to get better. It helps to be prepared for this.

You may have trouble keeping appointments

There may be times when you have trouble keeping appointments. You won't be able to get away from work, your family will need you at home, and so on. These things will seem completely unrelated to therapy. The strange thing is that they tend to happen just when therapy starts to touch on emotionally difficult topics. This is when you will do some of your most important work. Don't try to judge beforehand how important an appointment will be. Resolve to keep each and every appointment no matter what.

Ending therapy

Ending is an important phase of therapy. Thoughts and feelings will come up that did not come up before. It is a time to do important work, to reflect on what you have and have not accomplished, and to consider what lies ahead. Talk to your therapist well in advance about ending therapy, agree on an ending date together, then plan to do important work in the sessions leading up to it. Don't shortchange yourself by ending abruptly without allowing time for reflection and discussion.

Ask questions

This handout explains some things that are helpful to know when you start therapy. You may have many more questions. Ask your therapist about anything you don't understand. Sometimes your therapist may want to explore the thoughts and feelings behind your question instead of just answering it, so the two of you can learn more about how your mind works. But don't hesitate to ask. Therapy is not something done *to* you, like a medical procedure. It's a collaboration and a partnership and it works best when you are an active and knowledgeable participant.

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