

WHAT TO EXPECT IN THERAPY

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Deciding to see a therapist can be extremely anxiety-provoking. Just the first step of figuring out which therapist to choose might be overwhelming for you. This is entirely normal. You are trying to figure out who you can trust to share private, sensitive, and complicated information with and hoping that person can help you. To complicate matters, you are trying to ascertain all of this from a simple webpage where a bunch of acronyms (like CBT) are listed, and you may have no idea what they mean. Hopefully, this will help you to make sense of the search and feel somewhat prepared for starting therapy.

SELECTING A THERAPIST

What's the deal with the acronyms? Mental health professionals have one or more theoretical orientations, which are the theories and therapeutic techniques that they use to treat mental health concerns. The following is a basic description of some of the common types of theoretical orientations you might see in someone's profile:

- **Behavioral Therapy:** Behavioral therapy identifies problematic behaviors and helps you create ways to change these patterns. *Example: Mr. X always has an urge to drink when he gets done with work, so he drives a new route home with no liquor stores on the way to decrease temptation.*
- **Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT):** CBT is Behavioral Therapy + Cognition (also known as thinking). In addition to behavioral interventions, it focuses on identifying and changing unhelpful thoughts. *Example: Ms. Y is overly worried that she will get fired, despite getting rave reviews from her boss and finishing projects well in a timely fashion. The evidence does not support her belief, so she reassures herself, "I am a good worker because I have great reviews and complete my tasks," every time she starts to get worried about being fired.*
- **Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT):** ACT focuses on helping you to make commitments to positive choices through mindfulness, acceptance, distancing from unhelpful thoughts, and behavioral changes in the present moment. *Example: Mr. X is so depressed that he stays in bed all day. He values spending time with his children, but hasn't been lately. He commits to taking his children to the park, even if he thinks he would rather stay in bed, and is mindful of the joy he experiences.*
- **Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT):** DBT focuses on helping you to regulate emotions, improve relationships, feel more centered, and tolerate emotional distress through many specific skills that increase the number of positive coping choices someone has to deal with difficult situations. *Example: Ms. Y is feeling extremely angry, so she chooses to listen to happy music, take a bubble bath, and do something nice for a friend instead of hitting the wall. When she calms down, she can have an assertive conversation with the person she feels anger toward.*
- **Insight-Oriented Therapy:** Insight-Oriented Therapy seeks to help you understand underlying reasons for what you are doing or feeling. Often, patterns developed in childhood and adolescence are repeated frequently in adulthood. Awareness of these patterns and why they occur allows you to make different choices and be in conscious control of your life. *Example: Mr. X believes that he is worthless. He realizes that he started to believe this because his parents blamed him for problems in their marriage. He changes the impact his parents had on him by changing his beliefs about himself.*

- **Experiential Therapy:** Experiential Therapy uses art, movement, and activities to help you understand what is problematic in your life and can be particularly helpful for those who find traditional therapy to be intimidating. *Examples: Psychodrama, Animal Assisted Psychotherapy, Music Therapy, and Wilderness Therapy.*
- **Motivational Interviewing (MI):** MI focuses on your ambivalence, which is the feeling that you both want to change and don't want to change all at the same time. It helps you to be more motivated to make difficult changes and maintain those decisions. *Example: Ms. Y wants to quit gambling, but is not ready to quit. She works through the ambivalence with support and decide to make changes on her own terms, instead of having yet another person tell her what to do.*
- **Interpersonal Therapy (IPT):** IPT focuses on interpersonal issues that contribute to and maintain problems. It targets changing relationships to be more supportive and increasing interpersonal skills. *Example: Mr. X is grief-stricken when his father dies. He moves through the mourning process and creates relationships that fill roles he lost with his father's death.*

Yeah...but which therapist is right for me? It is important for a therapist to be familiar with and have experience treating your concerns. It is alright to ask direct questions about their experience and how they believe they can help you. In addition, we all have people that we like and dislike. It is extremely important to like your therapist! Many therapists offer a free consultation, either in person or on the phone. Call several and see who you feel most comfortable with. Pay attention to whether you feel understood, if you believe they are competent, and how comfortable you are while talking with them. Trust your instincts!

HOW DOES THIS THERAPY THING WORK?

What will the first session look like? The first session will be a lot of you talking about you. Your therapist will ask a lot of questions about what your difficulties are, how long you have been having them, and what you may have already done to try to resolve them. He or she is doing this to more fully understand what is happening for you and select the appropriate diagnosis to describe your concerns. Your therapist will likely also ask questions that may seem odd or awkward, but he or she is doing that to get a full picture of what might be happening for you.

You and your therapist will also identify your goals for what you want from treatment, which is usually what specific things you want: A. gone, B. improved, or C. added in your life. Then, you'll create a treatment plan about what types of things you will be doing to meet these goals.

The first session is also a time for you to ask a lot of questions. Keep asking questions throughout therapy and feel free to give your therapist feedback about what is and is not working. You and your therapist are a team working together, so it will be important to make it a great partnership as you move forward.

How will I feel after the first session? You are likely to feel a wide range of emotions, including: fear, excitement, shame, embarrassment, sadness, remorse, hopefulness, peace, relief...and the list goes on. All of these reactions are NORMAL! After all, how many people can you honestly say you have shared this much information with?...And how many of those were strangers? However, please do not let uncomfortable reactions prevent you from going back for another session. These emotions are part of the process, and it will be important to work through them as you obtain help. They usually subside in a few

meetings. However, if you feel unsafe or as if your therapist is not interested in really helping you, then maybe you want to call another therapist.

Are you going to analyze me? It is unfortunate that media portrayals of therapy tend to be a stretch from what actually happens. A few common concerns:

- Do I have to lie down on a couch? NO
- Can you read my mind? NO
- Will you know all about me from watching my behavior like on “Criminal Minds?” NO, but I will probably learn some things (such as that shaking leg probably means you’re a bit nervous)
- Are you going to pretend to listen, but really be thinking about your grocery list? NO
- Do you actually care about your clients? YES
- Will you ask me about my mother? Maybe, depending on your concern.

Please remember that therapists are people! Personally, I’m not clairvoyant, and I need you to be honest with what your concerns are and how you are progressing. Also, therapists are not “perfect.” As people, we all have our own struggles, which allow us to more fully understand what you are experiencing and offer helpful suggestions. Please do not assume that we have “perfect” lives or even that we know how to live a “perfect” life (as I’m convinced there is no such thing!) Remember that YOU are an expert on YOU and we are experts at how you can help yourself.

What do I talk about in sessions? Talk about whatever is happening in your life that impacts you and your symptoms. We do not feel depressed or anxious in a vacuum. There is no way to come to session and adequately describe your anxiety (for example) last week without discussing what happened in your week. Relationships, work, hobbies, and the gamut of what we experience in a given day are all fair game as long as they relate to your struggles. We also want to hear the successes! We want to hear when skills work, when you are making progress, and how your confidence is building. You will likely have “homework” from previous sessions, which are skills to try, behavioral changes, journaling, or thinking about a given topic. Please do not cancel if you did not get the homework done! Instead, let’s talk about what got in the way of doing it and move forward.

WHAT MAKES THERAPY EFFECTIVE?

There have been a multitude of studies to find the “active ingredients” in therapy, and many aspects have been identified. Some points to consider in getting the best success from therapy are:

- You get into therapy what you put into it. The more honest and open that you are, the more likely you are to benefit.
- The better your relationship is with your therapist, the more success you will have.
- Skills and homework are suggested to be helpful. Commit to trying them, even if you are not sure.
- Build upon past sessions with new sessions. Once you make changes, keep those changes going as you make new changes in future weeks.
- Patience is a virtue. Be kind to yourself because therapy is not easy. There will be times you feel as if you have had a setback or failed in some way. Mistakes are part of a process, and your therapist will not be disappointed in you.
- Give your therapist feedback about what is working and what is not so he or she can tailor treatments that will be best for you.