

What is individual therapy and how does it work?

Therapy is a special relationship between a mental health professional and a person who is struggling with something painful. Issues can be simple or complex, but the common denominator is that the pain is interfering with life to the extent that it feels safer to dive in and figure out what's going on rather than to maintain the status quo.

The warmth, respect and honesty between therapist and client is what makes therapy work. It's not just a "technique" or skill that the therapist has been trained in, it's the *relationship* that makes therapy work.

What to expect in the first 2-3 sessions. Most therapists will want to learn something about you before diving in. Even if you are sure of what the problem is, the therapist needs to put that information in perspective by taking a thorough history. These initial sessions may seem tedious, but they are very important and are often required by licensing boards or insurance companies. You may be asked questions about where you grew up, your family of origin, trauma you may have experienced, how you did in school, your current support system, financial stressors or whether you have had any legal or professional problems. Responsible therapists will also want to know your history of addictions and even whether you have, or have had, thoughts of suicide. A good therapist is very skilled at helping you feel safe enough to talk about these things.

Therapy is private and confidential. If your therapist needs information from someone else (your doctor, a family member) you will be asked to sign a written release of information that specifies what is to be shared and with whom. There will be a time limit on how long the release is valid. It can also be revoked at any time. Sometimes you may want to bring a friend or family member with you to therapy. If that's the case, the therapist assumes it is OK to discuss the topic you want to share with them. The only exception to confidentiality is if there's risk. If the therapist believes you or others (particularly children) are in immediate danger, they are required by law to get help right away even if it means breaking confidentiality.

Once the assessment is complete, you will begin to discuss what is bothering you the most. The therapist will steer that discussion to reveal what is in your control and what is not. From there he/she will explore what your life would look like if you were no longer experiencing the problem or issue. That information forms the objective of treatment.

After about 4-5 sessions, you will work with your therapist to develop a written treatment plan where you outline the Problem, Goal, Objective and Intervention. This is a very collaborative process. You will have the most information about the Problem and Goal and

your therapist will have ideas about how to establish a reasonable objective and the clinical interventions used to get there. The treatment plan also includes timeframes, ways to measure progress and when you will both review the plan.

Then the work really begins. Though therapists are very good at listening and helping you sort out your feelings, they may also want you to do “homework” which may involve reading things, trying new behaviors or doing worksheets about your own thoughts and feelings.

As you may only be with your therapist for an hour a week or less, it is very important that you do any homework that is assigned. It makes the process go much faster and helps you learn new skills and strategies for managing the problem that brought you in.

Therapy is a gift for both you and the therapist. It is incredibly intimate, supportive and helpful and the best part is that *you are the one being cared for*. The therapist never needs you to take care of them.

Therapy is the best investment you can make in yourself. The payoffs won't fluctuate, like in the stock market. The time and money spent gives benefits that last a lifetime.