



How to get the most out of therapy



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If you look at the big picture, everyone wants the same thing out of therapy - they want change in their lives.

It is often the case that when you get down to the details in a certain situation, everything starts to look different. Some people are clear about what they need, while others might only know that they want things to be different. Even if people are experiencing similar issues, their journeys will likely look and feel unique. The following ideas are offered as guidelines on the best way to approach therapy as a client

Eight ways to get the most out of therapy

1. Commit to attending each session

Part of the power of therapy is that it provides consistent and regular support in navigating your issues. By attending each session, you will gain a sense of continuity, and you'll be able to develop more trust in the relationship. Feeling emotionally safe as a client will enable you and your therapist to work at a deeper level - more conducive to long-lasting change.

It is usually best to have weekly sessions, but if you feel like you need them more or less regularly, then it is worth sharing this with your therapist to see whether they can accommodate this and explore how it may impact the therapy.

2. Try to provide honest feedback to your therapist

Since therapy is guided by your personal needs, it can be useful to share how you are finding counselling, including the relationship with your counsellor. Are sessions flowing well? Do you feel stuck? Is your therapist missing something in what you say? Did you find something they said particularly helpful? Any kind of feedback can benefit the therapeutic process.

No matter how empathic, warm and experienced your therapist is, they will get things wrong sometimes and cannot read your mind. Being honest in any relationship can be a powerful force for change, so by feeding back what is and what is not working for you, you can provide extra space for the relationship to grow and deepen. Some people find this difficult at first, but your counsellor is

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there to respond to your needs and will be open to engaging with what you say. Providing feedback can have the added benefit of developing your assertiveness skills within an environment that you feel safe.

3. *Strive to be open and honest with yourself*

Express your various feelings and thoughts and bring the different aspects of your personality into sessions. Try to notice the parts that make up your inner self, including those that you tend to dismiss or ignore. Even if you are not comfortable with them, they contribute in some way to your experience of the world. By allowing your different parts a voice, you can get a sense of the bigger picture of your inner world.

Your therapist will be there to understand you, hold you emotionally as you explore these different dimensions, and to assist you in working towards a greater understanding. This can enable you to (start to) let go of the parts you no longer need, to strengthen those that you do, and to develop new voices which help you move forward.

You don't need to put too much pressure on yourself though. In letting yourself be vulnerable, it is important to strike a balance between feeling safe and pushing yourself beyond your usual comfort zone. You don't have to express anything that you don't feel ready to explore. In such situations though, it may be helpful to consider what you would need in place to feel ready.

4. *Try to keep your focus on how you experience your difficulties*

Venting about others can be helpful, letting you release pent up emotions and providing comfort when things feel unfair. But, when venting becomes the focus of therapy, it is difficult to get a sense of any power you have to make changes. In other words, talking about other people is not going to make them change what they are doing, but focusing on yourself can allow you to find new ways to respond to the situation. Your counsellor will prompt and encourage you to focus on yourself if the therapy seems stuck on other people, but in the end, it is up to you to choose the direction to go in.

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5. Treat therapy as a kind of testing ground

Try taking the openness you develop with yourself in the therapy room to the outside world so that you can continue to notice patterns and learn about yourself between sessions. Nurturing your self-awareness in such a way can allow you to notice more of what is going on in the here-and-now, and can provide you with valuable insights and opportunities to respond differently. It can also help you to decide what to focus on in your next counselling session.

6. Keep a thoughts and feelings journal to help with the previous point and reflect on therapy sessions

This journal does not need to be organised in any particular way, but it should be a place for you to freely express your stream of thoughts and feelings in words or through any other medium. Sometimes just getting things out of the confines of your head is enough to bring about some clarity, but also such a practice can help in developing your self-awareness. You might also try noticing what you feel reluctant to express outwardly and reflect on whether this is something you want to eventually bring to your therapy sessions.

7. Give yourself enough time away from self-reflection

You might feel the urge to push ahead as quickly as possible, but lasting change takes time and is most effectively achieved by taking small steps. It can be exhausting to reflect on your thoughts and feelings, and, if you are in too much of a rush, then you run the risk of reflection becoming overthinking. The difference is that reflection allows you the space to see and feel your thoughts and emotions, whereas overthinking causes you to go around in circles. Make time in your week to relax, to do something you enjoy, connect to people, or even to engage in something distracting.

8. Maintain realistic expectations

Keep in mind that it is not unusual to feel worse before feeling better and that finding yourself struggling after making progress does not mean you are back at square one. Since you are opening yourself up to your vulnerabilities and trying new ways of being, both of these things are only natural. The general direction of the journey to improved well-being is upward, but you need to continue going around all those twists and turns. If you take the helicopter view and see the big picture, this can help you stay motivated and not feel defeated.

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