

## WHAT TO EXPECT FROM GOOD PSYCHOTHERAPY

*Five doctors put together their experience of their most successful clients, and identified how those clients succeeded in therapy. Here's what they had to say....*

Therapy is like life: the more you know about what you want and how to get it, the more likely you are to get what you want. Successful clients do not necessarily know how therapy works, but they know how they want to feel or act when their life is on track. Clients who succeed think about their goals and intentionally work on those goals between sessions of therapy. Tell your therapist your goals for the overall outcome of your therapy, and also your goal for each individual session. What you want from a session may vary from time to time: you may want to blow off steam, feel understood, solve a problem, let go of a painful memory, etc. Your therapist will shape your treatment work to accomplish both your short term and long-term goals, but you can enhance your progress, even in complicated circumstances, when you know the attitudes and actions that increase your chance for success. You can and should ask questions about decisions made for your individual treatment, but in general, there are identifiable things to expect from all therapy.

### *Seven expectations you should have...*

**1. Expect the frequency and duration of individual sessions to vary.** A typical session schedule is on a weekly basis for approximately 45 minutes. There are many reasons for this. The most important one is to provide continuity between sessions and give you the time necessary to reflect on what was discussed. It allows time to practice new behaviors and see how they work or what may be keeping them from working. It also allows time to restore equilibrium when the emotional work is demanding. Your therapist will decide with you how often you need to be seen and for how long at each session.

**2. Expect therapy to give you practical methods to correct your problems.** Therapy will provide you with the tools to make necessary changes. These tools will help you to develop the skills to solve problems. They will give you new methods to soothe anxiety, diminish depression, give the insight to find new ways to satisfy your needs, develop the ability to identify your feelings, and offer new ways to communicate with others more effectively.

**3. Expect your progress to be evaluated periodically.** Some insurance programs require written treatment plans that include client approval. In that case, the evaluation process may be more formal than a conversation during a session. Sometimes people experience rapid progress but some situations require more time for understanding and change to develop. Evaluating with your therapist will help you to understand your individual circumstances.

**4. Expect your relationship with your therapist to be crucial to your progress.** How you develop trust in your therapist, how you value the relationship, and how you respond to interactions with your therapist are all-important aspects of the therapeutic work. Your reactions to your therapist often will reflect the way you react to other significant people in your life. Also, expect that the problems you have in other relationships will emerge while you work with your therapist. However, because a therapy relationship is not a friendship, any situation can be discussed without risk to the relationship. Openly identifying and working through those feelings and reactions in the therapy session affords you a unique opportunity to examine your reasons for your behavior and to try new reactions, which emerge spontaneously from the interactions with your therapist, or they may be deliberately developed through role-play and practice.

**5. Expect the therapeutic process to continue between your appointments.** In all medical treatments, healing goes on while the patient is not with the doctor: splinted bones keep knitting, medicated infections abate, braced teeth straighten out. This happens as a result of the treatment of the doctor, but also because of the passage of time and the patient following the treatment plan while away from the doctor. At times your therapist will stimulate your thoughts and at other times will give you specific homework: things to watch for, write about, think through, practice with others, read, etc. The more attention you give to the homework, the more rapid your progress will be.

**6. Expect to see change.** Change may be subtle...like a small increase in your hopefulness, or more obvious, like learning a new skill that helps with conflict, anxiety, or depression; but in all cases, expect yourself to make progress. You are in control of how much effort you make, but some types of changes, such as altering underlying patterns of emotion or motivation, require time to occur. Progress is not a finished product at the end of the treatment. It should be evident as you go along in therapy.

**7. Expect to use your community.** Your therapist may encourage participation in groups of various types to enhance treatment or to offer additional support. Self-help groups, social organizations and clubs, therapy groups, religious connections, or informational groups provide the community context to make changes in yourself or developing new ways of relating to others. However, it is highly unusual for your therapy to use more than one individual therapist, so if you want to have regular, individual meetings with another therapist, community resource or spiritual leader, this should be discussed with your therapist.

### *Seven expectations you should not have...*

**1. Do not expect to make progress if you withhold information.** Your therapist can only work with information you provide, and if you leave out important factors about your circumstances or feelings, you will not be able to move forward effectively.

**2. Do not expect therapy to change your mood.** People often feel better after a session because it is a relief to talk about a problem, but overall, your mood is determined by many factors in your life and personality. The therapy process helps you modify your feelings and moods. You can learn practical ideas and methods to affect your mood, but you decide whether and when you use them.

**3. Do not expect therapy to hurt.** Growth is not necessarily painful even when it requires effort. If you find that the therapeutic process is creating feelings of distress, talk to your therapist. Your distress can be utilized to promote growth without creating more distress in the process.

**4. Do not expect your therapy to "fix" other people!** Your therapist cannot tell you how to change the behavior or attitudes you dislike in your husband or wife, boyfriend or girlfriend, child or parent, or even a friend, regardless of the therapist's skill. However, you should expect that your relationships with everyone around you would be affected by changes you make.

**5. Do not expect life to be perfect as the result of therapy.** In therapy you can learn to manage life's problems, but therapy cannot make problems disappear. Do not expect therapy to make you perfect either! Perfection is not a goal. It is a model for us to be inspired by.

**6. Do not expect therapy with an untreated addiction.** Like all of life, therapy works best when you are straight and sober. Therapists will terminate a session if you appear to be under the influence of drugs or alcohol. In addition, any untreated, active addiction, whether it is to alcohol, gambling, food or any other addiction, must be addressed before other therapeutic work can occur.

**7. Do not expect treatment to be without cost.** Looking for a bargain in the area of personal growth could easily cost you more in the long run. It could end up requiring more energy in struggling with your problems, more discouragement, and more pleasure in life lost before you complete your recovery. Successful therapy requires your resources of energy, time, and finances. Clear understanding of what you will invest into your recovery will make your work in treatment more profitable.

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