

Appendix 1

Getting the most out of therapy

Therapy involves establishing a therapeutic relationship between the client and the therapist which differs in nature and structure to any other relationship. The bulk of the work of therapy is conversational in nature, and yet the conversation and relationship differ from the normal patterns of relationships and conversations that you might have in your day-to-day life. As such, psychotherapy can seem rather strange at the outset, and it is helpful to have some idea about how it works, what you can expect and how you can get the most benefit out of it.

One of the ways in which the therapeutic relationship is different to other relationships is that, in therapy, both people are focused on the client. Your therapist's job is to help you increase your understanding of yourself and your situation, and to help you gain the resources you need to make changes in your life. The therapeutic relationship is designed to be both a supportive and a challenging environment that promotes optimal growth.

Firstly, it can be very helpful if you and your therapist have a discussion about your expectations of the therapy and the therapist. Lack of clarity on this at such an early stage can get in the way later on, and it is useful for you both to have a clear and realistic sense of what you expect from each other, and from the whole process.

We know from lots of previous research that clients who are actively involved in their therapy achieve better outcomes from therapy. In transactional analysis (TA) therapy, the client is expected to be an active participant at every stage in the therapy process. Therapy is not something 'done to' you – it is something you actively engage with.

You will be invited to set your own goals and objectives for your therapy. In this respect, the client very much sets the agenda. It is helpful if you come to therapy with some idea of what it is that you want to get out of therapy. It is fine if you are not clear to begin with, and a lot of people begin therapy in exactly that situation. In such situations, the early part of therapy is focused on exploration and on helping you develop some clarity around what you want and to set your goals. Your goals will provide the focus for the therapy. It is important that you and your therapist are clear about your goals for therapy. When you are both clear about where you are and where you want to get to, this can be likened to getting in a car with a destination in mind and a map and a clear idea of where you are

now. Working out the route is far easier when you have a clear idea of where you want to get to!

Sometimes clients set very large and ambitious goals. It is fine to have ambitious goals, although, sometimes if the therapy is relatively short-term, then these goals might need to be reworked to make them realistic and achievable for the time available. Your therapist will help you generate realistic and achievable goals.

As part of being an active participant in your therapy, and to facilitate the process of change, your therapist and you are likely to come up with ‘homework’ for you to do in between sessions. This can include things like using relaxation techniques, writing down your thoughts or feelings about something or practising new behaviours. Any ‘homework’ that you come up with together, or that your therapist suggests, will be specifically designed to help you with some aspect of your problem and to help you achieve your goals, or to take what you have learnt in therapy into your everyday life. Previous psychotherapy research shows that engagement with and completion of such homework contributes significantly towards positive outcomes in therapy. Regardless of whether your therapist recommends ‘homework’ or not, it is helpful if you spend time between sessions thinking about your therapy and, in particular, if you take forward the insights you gain in therapy into your day-to-day life and experiment with new ways of thinking, feeling, behaving and interacting with others as a result of the conversations you have with your therapist.

When you come to sessions, it is fine for you to have a clear agenda for the session, and it is fine for you to come without an agenda – there is no one right way of working, and it may be that you and your therapist try different things at different times to work out what is right for you at that particular time.

Therapy requires you to be fully present and experiencing in the moment, but also to have a part of you that is simultaneously observing yourself and how you are reacting and responding to what is happening in the session. Full engagement in therapy requires a high degree of honesty and transparency of thoughts and emotions and a willingness to speak about things that you wouldn’t ordinarily speak about. In doing so, you may be aware that you are not discussing everything that is coming to mind and that you are concealing some of your thoughts. It might be that they are painful, or embarrassing, or you might feel afraid of the potential implications of what you are about to say, or you think your thoughts are too trivial, or maybe you are concerned about what your therapist will think of you. Something like this happens to most people at some point in therapy. When you encounter reluctance like this, it is best dealt with by telling the therapist that you are hesitating, or feeling embarrassed or worried, or whatever the difficulty is, as your feelings and thoughts will be important. It can be very hard discussing issues that are so private and things that you may never have spoken about before. Often, the things we are most reluctant to discuss end up being some of the most important things to discuss in therapy. It is important to remember that it is not your therapist’s job to judge you and your therapist is not likely to be shocked by what you might say. You can talk about whatever you want to talk about, and you will not need to dredge up the past if you do not want to. Your therapist will be

particularly interested in how things are for *you* and your unique way of thinking, feeling and experiencing yourself, others and the world.

In sessions, your therapist will ask lots of questions and find out as much as s/he can about your thoughts, feelings, sensations, reactions, hopes and fears about many things, including experiences in your day-to-day life, the problems and situations that brought you to therapy, your experiences within sessions, and also experiences from your past. Your therapist will do his or her best to understand how things are from your point of view, and to understand how you feel and what you think. These questions will give the therapist information but, most importantly, they will help you gain greater insight and understanding into the nature of your problems and increase your self-awareness. In therapy, the emphasis is very much on the client engaging in a process of self-discovery.

As part of this, you will look at what you can do to improve things for yourself, how problems come about and what you can do about them, and also how you came to be the person you are and how you got to be in the situation you are in. Your therapist will also provide a degree of challenge and invite you to look at things in new ways.

Generally, therapists do not give advice and will not tell you what to do or what choices you should make in important decisions in your life. Your therapist will, however, help you to work out your options, work out specific courses of action, examine the pros and cons of each course of action and examine your thoughts and feelings regarding your options.

Sometimes your therapist might be able to provide you with some explanation to help you understand what is going on for you, or how you came to be in the situation you are in. It is fine for you to ask for explanation, although this cannot be rushed, and sometimes it can take a long time to work out the different pieces of the puzzle. As part of this, your therapist may share ideas or bits of theory which you might find useful.

If you have a tendency to overanalyse things or ‘think too much’, your therapist might suggest a more experiential approach instead. On the other hand, explanation and theory can help you make sense of situations which are confusing or distressing and can help you work out different options and ways of responding in different situations. The best approach is the one that is right for you, at that particular time, and your therapist will do what s/he can to ensure that s/he is working with you optimally at each stage of the therapy.

Your therapist will probably place a great deal of emphasis on the here and now and what is going on for you in the session. Therapists generally believe that understanding the here and now is the key to figuring out what is going on for you and working out a way forward. This can include discussing how you are relating to each other in the sessions. It is difficult to explain this, but it is something you will experience in sessions quite quickly and, although it might feel a little strange at first, you will soon become used to such frank, open discussions.

Therapy can at times be painful or feel embarrassing. It is important that, if you feel that, you are honest about it with your therapist. The feelings people have about therapy and their therapist are often of vital importance. By paying attention

to these feelings, and exploring them together, you and your therapist can learn a great deal about your problems, your ways of viewing things, your thinking patterns and, of course, how you relate to people. Therapy provides a unique environment to do precisely this. For example, sometimes people feel a little anxious, or inexplicably ashamed, or sometimes they even start worrying that their therapist might be judging them. All of these feelings are important. Even though it will feel a little strange at first, you will be encouraged to share whatever is on your mind, particularly relating to coming to therapy or your therapist, no matter how strange or irrational it might seem.

As the therapy progresses and the work gets deeper, your feelings will also very likely intensify. This can feel very strange, and sometimes even a little frightening. What is important is that whatever you are feeling about your therapist and the therapy relationship is important, and it is important to be honest about those feelings and bring them out into the open where you can look at them and understand them. As part of this, you might find that, on occasion, you feel very angry with, or even in some way hurt by, your therapist. These feelings are very important, and although you might not feel like it, it will be important that you find a way to express them to your therapist. Your feelings will be taken seriously and your therapist will help you to find a way forward. It is absolutely fine to say what you think your therapist is thinking, and to ask your therapist what s/he is thinking. Generally, your therapist will be clear and direct with you, although s/he might respond indirectly. If s/he responds indirectly, there will be a reason for this, and s/he will be clear with you about this.

It is absolutely fine to talk about subjects that may seem to be unrelated and to ‘jump around’ in sessions. Your therapist will be able to manage this, and will stop you and get clarification if necessary. Generally, there is some kind of link between topics, and your therapist will be listening out for emerging patterns, themes and links between the things you discuss. Also, in listening carefully to you, your therapist will be finding out more about *how* you think, not just listening to the content, so even jumping around can be useful from the therapist’s point of view. Sometimes things don’t make much sense during sessions, and it is often in the time between sessions when you have had time to process what was discussed and for your thinking to ‘settle into place’ that things will start to make more sense. Some sessions will feel very intense, whereas other will leave you feeling unsure about what was discussed or whether there is any point continuing. It is important that you mention your feelings about this to your therapist. Also, sometimes, sessions which you might have felt were frustrating end up being the ones where the underlying issues were beginning to be discovered and eventually you and your therapist can figure out where your frustration was coming from.

Timing is important, and the process of therapy cannot be rushed. It is something which unfolds over time. One way of thinking about it is to imagine the construction of a new building – it might take a long time for the foundations to be laid, and the ground work to be done, but these are crucial in determining the strength of the new structure.