

What is Psychotherapy?

This is a curious question that congers up a variety of ideas in one's mind. It is only in the not too distant past that the work of psychotherapy has become important to diagnosis and treatment of mental health disorders. No longer does the journey of psychotherapy bring to mind the thought of "voodoo" or some similar unsympathetic descriptors to mind. In reality, psychotherapy is an important way to address the challenges created by life experiences that result in depression, anxiety, grief, fear, narcissism, dependency, addiction, to name a few. Psychotherapy explores the inner world of humankind to examine the relationship between thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in the context to the external world. Therapists analyze current human functioning and influences of past experiences on current mental performance. More importantly, psychotherapy brings relief, hope, and optimism to many who ultimately see themselves in a different light.

Psychotherapy is built on relationships. After all, relationships are the context in which we all live. We are husband, wife, partner, friend, colleague, father, son, mother, or daughter and live in those relationships from birth to death. These roles that we play may be marked by hope, joy, disappointment and sometimes emotional pain. The therapist/patient relationship is a microcosm of our outer world and that relationship is recreated in the therapy room. In action, the therapist and patient form an alliance that is essential for success in therapy. Regardless of the perspective of the therapist, a strong trusting relationship is necessary for effective work. Patients need that connection to move forward, dealing with psychological scars that may dominate their mental apparatus.

That "therapeutic" relationship, formed by the therapist and patient, creates an opportunity for a trustworthy collaboration and paves the way for exploration into those memories, beliefs and interpretations one has about their interpersonal experiences. Exploring unknown territory begins once that therapeutic alliance is formed. The therapist and patient forge ahead, first by looking at the forces that made us into who we are and who we are becoming. Our lives take twist and turns, often unpredictable shifts in how we experience the world and how we interpret those experiences. The detours we take lead us in paths that may be healthy or damaging, depending on the circumstances. As it turns out, we are the sum of our experiences. All that we know about the world is interpreted by our mind's eye through relationships. These experiences can manifest themselves in all kinds of psychological distress that interferes with our optimal functioning. This distress takes the form of true experiences of sadness, depression, anxiety or other crippling symptoms. These result in diagnosable pathologies; crippling one's psychological state, interfering with one's most important relationships. Thus, the real work begins.

How do we do this? A lot of hard work. Hard work for the therapist and the patient. Each of us carries with us narratives or life experiences that have dominant themes. These themes overshadow the way that we think about ourselves and others. Part of the work of therapy is uncovering. Could it be that we have inaccurate understandings about some of our interpersonal relationships? Or do we need to accept the behavior of others in open forgiveness? Is it that we need to change our own behavior and accept responsibility for wrongs we have committed? Coming to terms with our self and our beliefs and actions is not an easy task. Good therapists patiently walk alongside patients examining hurts and interpretations of those hurts in an effort to reconcile and create new understandings of how one's behavior influences inner thoughts and relationships with others. The complexity of this work requires respectful collaboration between the therapist and patient. Seasoned therapists create a sacred place for patients to unarm one's defenses for careful examination of conflicts old and new. Ultimately, the patients will see symptoms abate and this is accompanied by improving the quality of one's life.

The most common forms of psychotherapy include individual, couples, family, and group therapy. These forms of therapy can be applied to a variety of diagnoses and effectively alter the course of one's life. The application of these therapies can be used exclusively or in combination. Depending on the patient's motivation and psychological mindedness, psychotherapy can lead to greater understanding of one's self, ultimately alleviating a cluster of symptoms that interfere with everyday living.

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