

THE “HOW-TO” OF SUCCESSFUL COUNSELING: FOUR THINGS TO CONSIDER FOR A CHANGE.

You've made a difficult decision-to seek counseling. You have met with your counselor once or twice, and you are left with the feeling that it just is not helpful or perhaps that your counselor does not understand you. So, you either quit going or make an appointment with a new counselor to start all over again.

Experiencing dissatisfaction with therapy or with your counselor can be especially frustrating, and can happen for a number of reasons. This article will explore some of those reasons and offer solutions to help you get the most out of your therapy.

There could be a number of reasons for feeling like therapy is not working: some having to do with you, and some having to do with your counselor, and some having to do with the nature of your problem. Possibilities include unrealistic expectations, vague goals or no goals for therapy, poor match between client and counselor, and commitment to change.

1. UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

What are your expectations? This is an important question to consider. Some people's expectations are influenced by dramatic media shows of therapy, or the idea of the counselor as an all-knowing, infallible authority. Perhaps there is the expectation that difficult problems can be solved in a session or two, or that therapy is always an intense experience. Or perhaps there is the expectation that a good counselor should be able to quickly read you and know what you are thinking without having to get to know you.

What should you reasonably expect?

- You should expect to feel treated with respect and listened to. If you have questions or concerns about your therapy, you should expect to address them open and honestly with your counselor, and have the counselor listen, respond, and treat you with respect.
- You can expect that some problems take time to solve, and that a good counselor can help you solve them best when he or she has gotten to know you a bit. A good measure of time to fix the problem, is related to how long it took to create it. Expecting a quick fix could set you up for disappointment.
- You can expect your counselor to be your support and your consultant in trying to help you with your problems, but do not expect him or her to be a super powered psychic guru, or to have any relationship with you outside of the office.
- Expect to take responsibility for your treatment. The idea that therapy is something that is given to you or done to you without your participation, effort, or work can set you up for disappointment. For example, often in therapy one is given materials to read or “assignments” to do, and is encouraged in a number of ways to apply what has been learned in therapy to the world outside of the counselor's office. To not try to “work” the therapy into your life is a set up for feeling like therapy is a failure.
- The expectation that therapy will always make you feel better does not take into consideration the fact that working through difficult issues can be emotionally taxing and upsetting at times. So, it is reasonable to expect that working through difficult issues can be emotionally hard at times.

2. PREPARING FOR THERAPY

We are more likely to experience therapy as a positive and helpful experience if we prepare a bit for the first appointment. This does not require a lot of time and soul-searching, but just some reflection upon what your concern is, what your goals are for therapy, and how you would know if you achieved these goals. Here are some sample questions to consider before your first appointment.

- Why now? What is currently happening in your life that has lead to the decision to seek therapy?
- What is your goal? What do you wish to accomplish by coming?
- Are you wishing to change your emotions, your behavior, or both? Specifically, how would you like your emotions or behavior to change?
- What, specifically, would be different in your life if you achieved your goals? That is, how would you know if your goals had been met?

Sometimes, it is difficult to come up with specific goals for therapy...we just know we don't feel "right". A good counselor will try to get to know you and your difficulties, and help you formulate some goals for therapy. If you have met with a counselor a couple of times, and no mention has been made of therapeutic goals, ask your counselor to assist you in goal setting. If your counselor resists working with you to set goals and reach them, ask him what his goals or purpose is for helping you. If he cannot answer and sessions feel more like a "social hour", you may wish to consider transferring to another counselor who can better meet your needs.

3. THE THERAPY RELATIONSHIP

The level of comfort and support you feel from your counselor is an important part of successful therapy. As noted before, your counselor is not your social buddy or your business partner. Your counselor is your support, ally, and is someone who is invested in working with you to achieve your goals. It is important that the therapy relationship be open and honest, and that you feel comfortable with your counselor. Questions to consider are:

- Do you feel listened to?
- Do you feel you could trust the counselor?
- Are you comfortable with the counselor's style of interacting?
- Is the counselor professional?
- Do you like this person? Therapy can be difficult with someone you actually dislike.
- Does the counselor seem knowledgeable?

If you feel like it is a poor match with your counselor, it is helpful to bring this into the open. The greatest thing you will ever do to help yourself and your counselor is to give him or her regular, specific feedback on what you do and don't like about your therapy experience. A good counselor will be open to your discomfort, and will be willing to listen and address it as it occurs. This often results in productive therapy and an important experience for you, namely, that it is O.K. to express your irritation, disappointment, or discontent without fear of rejection or criticism. If, although unlikely, your counselor is defensive and dismissive of your concerns, and unwilling to listen, it is time to transfer to a different counselor. The point is, it is always worth discussing with the counselor before making the decision.

4. COMMITMENT AND MOTIVATION

The desire to make changes is usually greater than the motivation to change. Sometimes therapy involves effort, and one may become discouraged or feel like therapy cannot help, when in fact, they need to hang in there, keep trying and work through it. One question to ask yourself in the beginning stages of therapy is, "How willing am I to work on this problem, to try different approaches, even if I don't feel like it, or see immediate results?" Once again, a good counselor should be able to work with you on enhancing your motivation and commitment, and support you in discouraging times.

In conclusion, the decision to seek counseling is an important one, and one that can be very rewarding if it is successful or frustrating if it yields no results. The key thing to remember is that you can greatly increase the odds that counseling will be a successful and rewarding experience by being an active participant, having well-developed and realistic goals, being committed to change, and working with a counselor with whom you feel comfortable.