

West Side Spirit
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Is Psychotherapy for you?

Once upon a time, it was an embarrassment, to say the least, to admit you had problems or that you needed help. Now, it seems as if almost everyone you know is “in therapy”. But just exactly what is this psychotherapy that has become so commonplace, and who really needs it?

Freud first discovered the emotionally therapeutic effects of the “talking cure”. He started by using hypnosis, which bypassed the conscious self, but as he explored the mind further, gradually developed the complex theory and practice of psychoanalysis. His work has become the basis for the development of a number of newer ideas about human dynamics and treatment.

However, whatever the type or emphasis all psychotherapy has a common theme. It is a creative process between the individual and the therapist based upon a wealth of knowledge about human behavior and emotions. It is a process of self-discovery and self-growth, which results in a sense of greater self-esteem and self-acceptance, in order to live more fully and successfully.

It is also a process of maturation, of developing realistic perspective, learning to take risks, becoming more of your own person and living unencumbered by dysfunctional feelings and patterns from the past. It means being able to feel your feelings, good and bad, to experience pain, anger and mourning when sad and upsetting this happen and to experience joy, love and success whenever possible.

Mr. Scott Peck, in his popular book *The Road Less Traveled*, writes about the “road maps” we all have developed to represent our views of life. It is his contention that people with emotional problems have narrow, restricted road maps based upon immature childhood perceptions and experience. And it is not surprising for therapists to hear that clients often feel like young children in adult bodies and are fearful of adult responsibilities and expectations.

It is a therapist's job to help clients develop more realistic, expanded and adult road maps of self and life. A therapist's tools are self-understanding, gained from personal psychotherapy, theoretical and life knowledge, and rigorous training, all at the service of the client, in an atmosphere of trust and empathy. It is also the therapist's business to understand that change is difficult and often frightening, and that there will be “resistances” to change that will come up over and over again, in many guises and will need working through.

And it is the client's job to face his or her worries and fears, to learn, with the therapist's support, to understand self-defeating patterns from the past (old stuff), and then take the all-important risk of making clear and conscious choices for change. Also, the client must accept that he or she is neither as bad nor as good as he or she wishes to be, that being perfect is impossible and that being “good enough” is indeed “good enough”.

One aspect of psychotherapy that most often troubles people considering treatment is the issue of dependency. This is understandable because troubled people often have had traumatic early experiences of dependency with parents who were unreliable or unavailable in some way. However, it must be remembered that the kind of dependency that may be experienced in treatment is of a healing and corrective nature. It provides needed support and allows for the growth of trust, along with a sharing of values, ideas and feelings between client and therapist, and, ultimately, makes possible the development of happier relationships with others outside the therapist's office.

What, then, are the signs that a person needs or could profit from psychotherapy? An important aspect of mental health is self-esteem. This means not only liking yourself but also a feeling of competence, mastery and enjoyment in the major areas of life: love, work and play.

If you do not like yourself there is always some distortion in your sense of identity and ability to enjoy a full life. You may be an underachiever as a result of poor self-esteem, or, ironically, an overachiever whose accomplishments are never enough. Without self-esteem there will be always be a major feeling of failure or even emptiness. Life may not seem worth living, or you may feel out of control. It may be difficult, even impossible, to develop satisfying relationships with others, either the opposite sex or friends. You may be withdrawn and afraid to take the necessary risks to meet or get close to others. Or again, you may get overly close to others, clinging and demanding too much from those who love you. There may be trouble understanding other people's needs or you may feel angry and cheated by others a good deal of the time. You may also have compulsions or obsessions that rule you and interfere with full living. Addictions (eg. eating disorders, gambling, alcoholism, overspending, etc), sexual dysfunctions, constant anxiety and phobias may plague you. There may be ongoing marital or family problems.

Or you may be just embarking on adult life and feel alone, lost and scared. There may be depression for no discernible cause that goes on too long or occurs too often. You may find you have inexplicable mood swings or react too strongly or out of perspective to people and events. You may also find that, somehow, chaos or procrastination disrupts your every-day life on a consistent basis to the point where you get nothing accomplished and under use your talents.

Whether specific conflicts and issues keep coming up for you and do not seem to get resolved, or there are overall feelings of discomfort, lack of fulfillment, and unhappiness with yourself, you should certainly consider psychotherapy. You will worry, perhaps: does it really work? There is no absolute guarantee that a psychotherapist can give you. Psychotherapy is not an exact science. Indeed, many feel it is more an art. However, studies that have been done in recent years strongly indicate that 80 or 85 percent of people entering therapy do appreciably benefit from it. Thus, with a good therapist and strong motivation to change your life, the chances are excellent that the process will help you to become a more adult, fulfilled and competent human being!