

Make Every Session Count: What is Brief Therapy?

Is Brief Better?

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Is Brief Better?

WHEN YOU'RE REALLY sick, you probably make an appointment with your physician. The physician examines you, prescribes medicine, and—with time and good fortune—you're well again.

Psychotherapy began with a similar model: the "powerful doctor" healed the "sick patient." The patient may not have chosen to see a therapist, but was too ill to resist. It was generally assumed that a mentally ill patient would need treatment for a long time, if not forever. The relationship between the therapist and the patient reflected an unequal division of power, with the patient holding the short straw. Those earlier patients saw a therapist because they were "sick," not because of the problems of daily living.

Today people often make the choice to see a professional therapist—counselor, clinical social worker, marriage and family therapist, pastoral counselor, psychologist, or psychiatrist—when life feels too hard to deal with alone.

Today's clients know they won't be in therapy for twenty years or have to recount every detail of childhood. This is not to say that long-term therapy doesn't have its place. Brief therapy is not for everyone, nor is it appropriate for every problem (more on this in chapter 7). But for many people, a brief intervention can offer much needed help, support, and emotional relief.

Hire a Consultant!

If your finances are complex, or if you're having financial problems, you might decide to hire an accountant. The accountant would assist you in creative problem solving, show you how to work out your difficulties with income, expenses, and taxes. And ultimately help you to make the best choices.

Similarly, if you were physically out of shape and decided to get healthy, you might go to a gym and hire a fitness instructor. A fitness professional would assess your condition, guide you through exercises appropriate to your current abilities and physical state, and help you choose exercises suited to your particular needs and goals.

When living gets hard, you could go shopping (some folks call this "retail therapy"). You may find temporary relief—or escape—this way. However, short-term solutions are often not the answer. It is likely that you'll get more

in the long run if you hire a mental health consultant.

Is your mental health as important to you as your physical well-being? You don't stay in shape by being lucky, you have to work at it. A strong marriage is the result of hard work. And a healthy mind and attitude may at times require a little outside help and maintenance—a "tune-up" for how you think and feel.

The best, most effective way to feel better is to become an active and knowledgeable participant in your treatment process.

When you view a therapist as your mental health consultant, the unequal division of power seen in earlier years is gone. You alone made the decision to enter therapy—no one made that decision for you. You may be in pain and seeking relief, but that doesn't mean that you can't be an educated and informed consumer.

Your mental health consultant is there for you as a facilitator of change, healing, and growth. Like the fitness consultant who doesn't "cure" but provides direction, guidance, and support, the mental health consultant is an agent of change working with you, to help you through difficult times. A therapist can, for example, help you to learn more effective problem-solving skills, resulting in greater self-confidence and increased ability to cope with your current problems.

Maybe you'd prefer to be your own mental health consultant? Here are a couple of things to keep in mind: emotional pain is considerably more intense when it is experienced alone and none of us can be completely objective about our own circumstances.

Your mental health consultant won't and can't do the work for you, but will listen objectively and help guide you toward the results that you choose. Each life experience gives you and your consultant the chance to examine your thoughts, beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes and how they work for and against you in your daily living.

Your therapist isn't there to "fix" or "change" you, but to build on your strengths. A consultant is your guide to understanding the complex nature of stressful events and how they are related to your thoughts, attitudes, and beliefs about yourself and your world.

A therapist/consultant can help you reduce your pain, minimize future disasters, and develop action plans and strategies for growth and healing, now and in the future. The emphasis in brief therapy is not on "sick patients" and "powerful doctors." It's on people in distress making wise choices so they can take charge of their lives.

Why Brief Therapy?

Since psychotherapy arrived on the scene in the early part of the twentieth century, this form of treatment has been considered a lengthy endeavor. Therapists advocating traditional Freudian analysis insisted for therapy to be beneficial, it had to be intense and long-term. Those few who were able to afford it entered analysis and visited their therapist three to five times a week for many months, and often many years. Psychoanalysis was often helpful for this small group of clients, and, because it was the treatment of choice for the "rich and famous," it became the approach glorified by the media and desired by the rest of the population.

What's wrong with this picture? First, long-term psychotherapy is extremely expensive and therefore out of reach for most people. Human emotional suffering is widespread and affects people from all walks of life, rich and poor alike. Second, extensive research finds little compelling scientific evidence that, overall, long-term psychotherapy is more effective than brief therapy. In fact, the majority of people looking for therapy prefer short-term psychotherapy and greatly benefit from the experience.

What is "Brief Therapy"?

Generally brief therapy is defined as psychotherapy lasting from one to twenty sessions. In the contemporary "managed care" environment, and in most public treatment settings (community mental health, university counseling centers), brief therapy averages between three and twelve sessions.

In the United States more than 8 million people see a therapist each year and 85% of them are treated with brief therapy.

This shorter course of treatment—fewer sessions and significantly lower costs—makes psychotherapy available to more people.

Sometimes therapy must be brief because insurance companies, mental health clinics, counseling centers, and HMOs have limits on the mental health benefits that they offer. However, short-term psychotherapy is often brief by design. Short-term therapy includes special techniques that can speed up the process, and the results are often better than for long-term therapy.

Brief therapy, however, is defined not only by the length of treatment. There are a number of goals and characteristics of brief therapy that set it apart from longer forms of psychological treatment. The key elements

include:

- Focus on a *specific problem*, not on "reshaping your personality"
- *Active involvement* of both client and therapist
- Emphasis on *solutions*, not causes to life problems
- *Time-limited* course of treatment

We'll take a look at how it works in the next chapter.