

Make Every Session Count: What is Brief Therapy?

Off the Couch and into Action

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MOST BRIEF THERAPY approaches are "action oriented." Every session really does count. With only a few sessions available clients cannot afford to be passive or to gradually explore their concerns, feelings, and past and present experiences. The process requires rapid identification of and attention to the primary area of greatest current concern. Therapists call this establishing a *focus*.

It's not that other issues or life experiences are unimportant. In brief therapy, you and your therapist together will identify and agree to work on *the* most important or urgent concerns in your life right now (this may be, for a particular symptom, such as depression or panic attacks, a particular life struggle, such as resolving conflicts with an employer, or learning more effective ways to resolve marital problems). Once you and your therapist have clearly identified "the problem," this focus becomes the central issue to be discussed in therapy sessions.

- A second way brief therapy is "active" is that the therapist is more likely to speak out in therapy sessions. In some forms of therapy the therapist stays pretty quiet; in brief therapy there generally are more questions, answers, feedback and active problem solving.
- A third way brief therapy is lively is that it really encourages the client to *take action*. This may be in the form of between-session homework assignments (keeping a personal journal, monitoring progress using self-rating checklists, trying out new behaviors in life situations). A lot goes on outside the therapy room and between sessions. Many clients enjoy these activities that make them active participants in their treatment, feeling that they are better able to "take charge."
- Another way that brief therapy is action oriented is through developing the client's "tool kit" for dealing with stressful situations, including life skills for:
 - o *Interpersonal coping*—more effective and practical ways to problem-solve and resolve conflicts with friends, relatives, co-workers, and important others
 - o *Internal stress reduction*—powerful ways to reduce anxiety, sadness, despair, and irritability.

One important benefit of increasing your coping skills is that you may discover these skills offer you a greater sense of control and mastery in everyday life situations, reducing feelings of helplessness and powerlessness. Coping skills may be taught in individual or group therapy sessions, or with the use of selfhelp books. Part III of this book provides a brief coping skills manual describing a number of effective approaches. You may find this helpful as you are going through your brief therapy experience.

No one ever gets completely "cured," 100 percent emotionally healthy or immune to the pain of human experiences of loss, disappointment, or frustration.

Living life, meeting challenges, surviving hard times, and growing are lifelong processes. Brief therapy can best be seen as an important experience or tool that helps people as

they hit those inevitable hard times throughout life. The goal of brief therapy is not to cure, but to provide support, facilitate growth, and increase effective coping.

Research shows that people can change and experience benefits while *in* brief therapy, but it doesn't end there. A good deal of growth and "work" continues after therapy has ended. The last session of brief therapy, in a very real sense, is not *the end*. After the final session, clients put newly learned skills into action, acting as their own "therapist." Following a course of brief therapy, one of the authors received a note from a woman client stating:

"I stopped coming to therapy sessions three months ago, but it's like I'm still in treatment. I often hear your voice in my mind saying, 'Remember to be decent to yourself or 'It's okay to give yourself permission to be who you are and to feel what you feel.' ...I also kinda do therapy with myself. . . and it helps a lot." The time spent in therapy may be "brief," but life doesn't stop handing us challenges, frustrations, joys, and hopes. No one ever stops growing; no one ever has it all figured out.

It is not uncommon for clients to go through two or more courses of brief therapy, at various times in life. At twenty-four, Sara saw a therapist seven times for help as her marriage floundered and she and her husband became more distant with each other. She also attended a group for couples. The therapy and support group helped Sara and Ken find new ways of balancing their relationship, and they stayed together. Nine years later, following the death of her mother, Sara returned to her therapist to help her deal with her loss. They met for six sessions, though her grieving continued well past the time of her last session. However, therapy helped her to accept the reality of her mom's death and the depth of her sorrow. She began to feel more "okay" about expressing her sadness to her

husband and her kids. She was clearly on the road to emotional healing from this painful life event.

Therapy is not a magical solution or a cure-all for the painful things that happen to us as human beings. Brief therapy can, however, be a tremendously important resource during painful times, and a foundation for successfully handling the tough times that may come later.