

*Make Every Session Count: What is Brief Therapy?*

# Realistic Results

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## Realistic Results

"FROM MISERABLE to marvelous!"

So boasted a recent ad for a psychotherapist in the Yellow Pages. Such promises of miraculous "transformation/" in our opinion, are at best misguided, and at worst unethical, preying on the desperate needs of suffering and vulnerable people.

At the heart of psychotherapy is a commitment to the truth. Well-trained therapists know the benefits of psychological treatment and the limitations. In all honesty, there is no way to ever know for sure ahead of time how much you may benefit from treatment. All that is really known is that effective treatments do exist and large-scale outcome studies have shown that the majority of clients can benefit from brief therapy. The fact also remains that some people do not benefit—and some (a small minority) get worse.

Many times psychotherapy is literally "life saving" (for example, in helping to prevent suicide). However, for most people, brief therapy is likely to yield less dramatic positive benefits. As we examine some common outcomes from brief therapy in this chapter, remember that there is no guarantee that everyone will benefit. Nevertheless, these do represent realistic and rather typical results.

*Feeling less depressed, anxious, and tense<sup>1</sup>*

*Feeling better about who you are and your ability to manage your life.* This can take many forms. Before beginning therapy, many people erroneously conclude, "I'm crazy . . . I'm neurotic...I'm weak and inadequate"...or, "I'm screwed up." For many, many psychotherapy clients, an important experience in therapy is developing a new view or belief about themselves. Negative, self-critical views, like those noted above, usually give way to compassionate, more realistic beliefs: "Of course I'm sad...this is what people feel when they've had a serious loss"...or, "I am sensitive to criticism and it irritates me when my wife is overly critical toward me"...or, "I certainly don't like feeling so upset by this rejection, but I understand why it hurts so much. This relationship meant a lot to me!"

The acceptance of such views can lead to changes in how you feel about yourself. Therapy clients commonly

adopt healthier attitudes toward themselves.

"*Getting clear.*" Clients typically experience increased clarity about how they really feel about things, what they want and need, what they value, how they see other people, and what things in life really matter to them.

Among the myriad inner feelings, beliefs, and thoughts you hold, many were taught to you by your parents, teachers, and other influential people during your early years. Such "implanted" beliefs and thoughts (what some psychologists call "injunctions") may be helpful and agree with your own personal values: "I really am a good-hearted person" or "It's important to try my best at tasks that are challenging."

Unfortunately, implanted thoughts can also be self-critical or negative: "You're just going to fail no matter what you do, so why try?" or "Real men don't cry, so if I cry, I should feel ashamed."

Have you heard—or told yourself—any of these?

As you begin to talk openly and honestly about your thoughts and feelings, a common outcome is that you will, at some point, become clearer about which thoughts and beliefs arise from your inner, true self, and which feel somewhat alien.

### *Common Negative Injunctions*

Don't be emotional.	Don't cry.
Don't rock the boat.	Don't get your hopes up.
Grow up! Don't be childish.	Don't ask for strokes.
Don't get too close.	Don't really trust people.
Don't trust your feelings, body, gut reactions.	Don't do better than mom/dad.
Don't get mad.	Be logical.
Be perfect.	Be strong.
Please others.	Try harder, stick with it, don't give up, don't let go.

Becoming clear about how you really feel (beliefs, thoughts, values) can be important in two respects. First, you are in a better position to make decisions or take actions that "feel right" based on your true inner beliefs. This may lead to greater ease in decision making and an increased sense of self-confidence. Second, a common result is a

better developed *sense of self*. This last experience is a bit hard to define, but is an important and common outcome. It is often described by people as feeling more "real," "alive," "authentic," or "whole," and feeling better able to hold on to the inner awareness of "what I truly want, desire, believe in, or need" (see chapter 17).

As you begin to talk openly and honestly about your thoughts and feelings, you will become clearer about which thoughts and beliefs arise from your inner, true self, and which feel somewhat alien.

*Accepting yourself.* Stressful life events often make us feel anger or fear. Yet, for many of us, to actually admit these feelings to ourselves or to express such emotions leads to

feelings of shame, self-criticism, or anxiety. A common outcome from brief therapy is a new sense of okay-ness about being "you," accepting who you are, and expressing it without shame or self-criticism.

*Developing effective problem-solving skills, ways of coping with stress, and new approaches to handling interpersonal problems.*

*Learning important life lessons (Strupp 1969):*

- I may have some shortcomings, but I am what I am, and that's not so bad.
- Some emotional pain is inevitable and, in the long run, probably necessary. You can't just grit your teeth and hope it will go away. Losses have to be mourned.
- In most instances, the expression of feelings is not dangerous (expressing anger or sadness).
- I have a right to be who I am...to be true to myself (values, beliefs, lifestyle), even though some people may not agree or be able to accept me.
- Life may seem unbearable during a tremendously painful situation, but you ultimately survive.
- It's easy to lose perspective when you are in the middle of stressful times; yet most of the time, even very difficult circumstances only last a while. With time, most people discover inner strengths and resources, and are able to get back on their feet and move ahead with their lives.
- Sometimes you have to modify your wishes and hopes, learn to endure frustration and accept "half a loaf"
- Wishing doesn't produce results. In order to reach goals, one needs to act, to take specific action steps.
- You can't always get what you want.
- Certain ways of thinking, acting and behaving, interpersonal behaviors and attitudes simply don't work and in the long run are self-defeating. In general, "cooperation" is a good technique for

getting along with people.

- If you take a good, honest look at your early life—the way you were treated, the general emotional atmosphere in your home—it will probably begin to make sense to you why certain things are especially emotionally painful (for example, in a family atmosphere of extreme shaming and criticism, it is understandable that a person might grow up being especially sensitive to criticism).
- Ultimately you are responsible for your own actions.
- Honesty (generally) is the best policy.

You may never come to agree with all of these ideas, but we encourage you to work toward a positive view of the capacity to *direct your own life*. This, after all, may be the single most important lesson of all.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Psychotherapy outcome research has shown that symptom reduction (specifically anxiety and depression) is one of the most significant and common results from brief therapy. Often short-term treatment for anxiety and depression may involve both psychotherapy and psychiatric medicine (see Chapter 18).