

Make Every Session Count: What is Brief Therapy?

When Brief is Not Enough



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When Brief is Not Enough

EVEN THOUGH BRIEF therapy can be very helpful for many people, it is not always the appropriate course of action.

Sometimes, brief psychotherapy is simply not enough. Some people have gone through tremendously difficult times and have deep emotional wounds that require longer treatment. Their problems involve not just one major focus, but several. Serious difficulties may affect many aspects of life. Brief therapy can provide a starting point for such folks, and many are able to make some gains. But those who have a lot of healing or growth to do, while able to benefit from brief treatment, may subsequently enter either a support group or longer-term therapy.

For two types of emotional problems, brief therapy is probably not a good idea at all. Those who have experienced extreme psychological traumas in childhood (physical, emotional, or sexual abuse or severe neglect) find that the intensity and depth of their emotional pain may not be adequately addressed in brief therapy. For them, there is the risk that a little therapy may open up emotional floodgates, without the opportunity to truly resolve and work through the pain. In such cases, brief therapy can be worse than ineffective—it can be harmful.

People with severe, chronic mental illnesses (schizophrenia, manic-depressive or bipolar illness, severe personality disorders) are not likely to benefit much from brief therapy. These major emotional disorders almost always require long-term supportive treatment and/or psychiatric medication.

Some symptoms always warrant a referral for intensive psychiatric treatment. Here's a brief summary of signs of serious psychiatric illness:

- Extreme confusion, erratic behavior, hallucinations, and abnormally unrealistic thoughts are signs of *psychosis* (for example, schizophrenia).
- Severe mood swings and manic episodes (times of very high energy, agitation, decreased need for sleep, rapid speech) may indicate *bipolar (manic-depressive) disorder*.
- A history of intense, often chaotic relationships with others; intense, volatile emotions of jealousy,

anger, hostility, loneliness; bouts of severe drug or alcohol abuse, multiple suicide attempts, and/or self-mutilation all may be signs of *severe personality disorders*.

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- Severe eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa (extreme weight loss, preoccupation with weight, a distorted

perception of body image). This is a severe and sometimes life-threatening psychiatric disorder and is not amenable to brief therapy.

- Significant alcohol or other substance abuse. Brief therapy may be helpful, but only after one has successfully attained sobriety. Such individuals *must* first seek treatment from a twelve-step program such as Alcoholics Anonymous or a professional chemical dependency treatment program.

The bottom line: The conditions summarized above indicate a number of exceptions, but the vast majority of people seeking psychotherapy can and do benefit from brief approaches. Chances are you'll find it valuable if your own circumstances do not involve one of these more serious conditions.

Long-Term Psychotherapy: Another Formula for Healing and Growth

Some emotional difficulties clearly require intensive and lengthy psychological treatment. However, you don't need to be in serious emotional pain to benefit from long-term therapy. As we've seen, brief therapy can help most people deal with fairly specific life problems, but many folks have chosen longer-term treatment for resolution of psychological issues and personal growth. As we sing the praises of brief therapy, we certainly don't want to overlook or underrate the value of long-term psychotherapeutic treatment.