



When it was first developed a couple of centuries ago, the practice of therapy was called “the talking cure.” It’s a good description. When negative emotions overwhelm us, painful relationships burden us or we find ourselves stuck in patterns of thinking and behaving differently than we’d like, it can impact our lives very much like a disease. It can affect our energy level, motivation and ability to accomplish our goals in the same way that arthritis or diabetes might. And in the same way you’d seek out medical help to treat those symptoms – maybe even eliminate them — talk therapy is where you go to reduce mental, emotional and relational symptoms that get in the way of accomplishing your goals.

It’s normal for people to have a doctor, whether they’re sick at the moment or not. That’s because it’s pretty much a given that at some point you are going to need one. Sooner or later, you’ll call on one a doctor just for the big issues, requiring surgery and chemotherapy, but for all the non-life-threatening stuff that just gets in the way of life: broken bones, cuts and bruises, minor infections, vaccinations and so on.

So it also is with therapy. Therapists are trained to diagnose and treat mental and emotional symptoms – not just the major stuff (trauma, abuse, mental illness, etc.), but also the less life-threatening stuff that slows us down and gets in the way of our well-being (stress, anxiety, grief, painful life transitions, etc). You don’t wait until you’re dying to visit a doctor. And you don’t have to be on the verge of breakdown to visit a therapist. Do you find yourself struggling with the same undesirable patterns in relationships? Are you having difficulty coping with stress? Are you held back by unhelpful and unwanted thoughts? Are there emotional barriers that keep you from doing the things you want to do? Therapy is scientifically proven to help.

But therapy is, for the most part, just talking. It doesn’t always feel like it’s working, especially after just one or two appointments. How could talking make it any better? It seems like focusing on our mental and emotional issues might make them worse! Here’s the thing – it’s been carefully studied for decades. We know it works. And we even know some of the reasons it works. One of those reasons is that patterns of feeling and thinking aren’t like physical cuts or bruises. There is very much a physical dimension to them – emotional distress and positive effects of therapy show up in the brain. But what makes up the experience of emotional distress are words. “I’m not good enough. This is too hard. Things will never change.”

It's the connection between words and feelings that therapists are trained to deal with. There are all sorts of differing theories and perspectives licensed therapists have about those things, but all of them are somehow proven to be equally effective.

So what should I look for in a therapist? The number one most important factor is relational fit. Because the "talking cure" is administered in conversation, your level of comfort and openness is crucial for treatment. And as with any relationship, commitment doesn't happen immediately. But if you are reasonably comfortable with your therapist after two or three sessions and you can commit to the process of therapy, the statistical guarantee that you will experience improvement is very high. Though it may seem like your therapist isn't doing much in the midst of conversation, they are actually carefully observing and responding in ways proven to be helpful. They know that "advice" and "practical steps" can do more harm than good unless provided at the right stage in the process.

You don't have to know anything about the theory or skills being used to know it's the right fit. Just ask yourself – are they really listening? Do they validate my emotions and experience? Do they understand my goals and are they willing to work with me to reach them? Are they an ally in my healing? Do they understand before challenge or confrontation? Do they center me as the client or do they put the focus on themselves? Do they provide genuine insight and reflection? If these things seem to fall into place, and you are able to commit to the process, it's safe to say that you will get better. As you do, you can step back from therapy and re-enter as needed. The hardest part, for most people, is taking the first step and calling for an appointment. It can be daunting to randomly select someone from a google search, so we have provided a curated list of those therapists our community has contacted in one way or another.

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