

How Psychotherapy Works

How exactly does psychotherapy work? How and why do people get better in therapy? That's the question for today.

Well, the answer you get from professionals depends on the orientation of the therapist you're talking to. Each school of thought has a theory as to how and why their approach works— Oh, and, of course, why their approach works better than anyone else's approach.

Some of them talk about changing the way clients in therapy think —the patterns and habits of thought that create suffering. Others focus on the power of mindfulness to identify negative thoughts and feelings and to then let them go. And still others emphasize the importance of the past, the contribution of our childhoods to our present difficulties. These therapists focus on the ways, in other words, that we repeat the past in the present. According to this model, therapeutic progress comes from excavating the traumas of our growing up and healing them in a supportive relationship with a therapist.

And, finally, it should be said--most people agree that the development of a trusting relationship between therapist and client —in whatever school of thought--is essential to the work of change.

But while each person is different and each therapy unique, the

essential engine of change in psychotherapy isn't all that complicated.

Here's the crux of the matter: People get better in therapy when two things happen: First, the cultivation of self-awareness and psychological insight into the workings of one's mind is usually a powerful tool in curing what ails us. That's the first thing. And, second, people get better when they have real positive experiences that correct the bad experiences that caused them to become unhappy and go in to therapy to begin with.

So—insight and then what we might call “corrective emotional experiences” are the 2 key things that have to happen in any successful psychotherapy.

Why insight? Why is insight so important? Well, regardless of our orientation, we therapists tend to believe that the root causes of emotional suffering are often unknown to the person doing the suffering. If we can expose the hidden causes of our suffering, we can gain some better control over them. Knowledge is power in this case.

For example, let's consider a common enough problem that people in therapy have. Although it might seem irrational on first glance, but many of us are afraid that if we get better, if we get healthier, if we manage to get more of the good things in life, if we move forward in our lives toward healthy aspirations, something bad might happen. Yep...this is called survivor guilt and it's almost

universal. Change, in other words—even positive change—is scary. We may have problems, but they're OUR problems, they're familiar, and we're used to them.

Psychotherapy helps us understand the ways that we fear change, the things we're afraid of, and it helps us understand the reasons we're afraid of these things. It makes these fears and the ways we avoid these scary things by shooting ourselves in the foot ----it makes all of this conscious. Once we're aware of what we're afraid of, we almost automatically get less scared. Once we see, once we really understand all the ways that we hold ourselves back in order to feel safer, we no longer are as compelled to do so. We can-if you will-risk being happy.

So, insight—knowledge of our selves, our feelings, our stories—is critically important in producing change in therapy. When we understand what triggers us—and why—we're then freer to make better choices. It's said that psychological problems grow in darkness but get better in the light.

But insight isn't usually enough. People also need to have real experiences in the real world that help them change their view of themselves and their view of others. This is true in life as well as in therapy. For example, someone who grows up feeling unloved and then therefore unloveable. Such a person might likely suffer from low self esteem. But people aren't doomed to despair and there are lots of people who manage to improve their self-esteem over time.

How do they do it? Well, often, it's love in the real world. Such a person improves his or her self – esteem as a result of finding a loving partner. A partner's love is an antidote to that person's private sense that he or she is undeserving of love. May sound simplistic but the experience of it is profound. Love can cure depression.

But as is so often the case with matters of the mind, such a scenario is more complicated than it seems. Because, Well, don't we often see depressed people screw up potentially good relationships? It turns out that if we believe we're unworthy, we can easily set relationships up to fail, thereby confirming our internal sense of being unloveable. We see this also, a lot. On the other hand, when the external environment is telling us that we're special, that we're loveable, we can potentially overcome our private doubts. The point here is that having good experiences can transform someone's psychological life, but it's not automatic.

In fact, not surprisingly, this is where insight comes into play. When someone experiences something new, something corrective and healing, the likelihood that he or she will learn from it, will change for the better, is enhanced if the entire process is reviewed and understood. So, if I suffer from a sense that I'm unimportant to others and then meet people who contradict this, who regard me as special, I'm more likely to improve my self-image if I know what's going on, if I know that I've always felt unimportant and why, and if I can see that my current positive experience offers

proof that my old belief is wrong. If this whole process can come under your conscious review, you're more likely to learn and change. So, insight and new experience work together.

But new experience is still important. In psychotherapy, it comes in two ways. First, the therapist relates to the client in ways that are intentionally positive—deliberately empathic and supportive—and in so doing counteracts the clients negative beliefs and expectations. So the therapeutic relationship itself is one of these new experiences that helps cure the client.. Secondly, the therapist will often encourage the client to experiment out in the real world with ways of being that are the opposite of his or her negative habits and / or relationships. So, for example, I might encourage a client who is afraid of socializing with people to venture into gradually more crowded venues, balancing feelings of safety with experimenting with new behavior. Or if someone has trouble asking for help—and this is someone who has trouble asking for help --I might encourage that person to find someone they trust and a make a very small ask of that person, all the while helping him or her to examine the feelings that get stirred up. I'm not just providing a new experience in the therapy for the client, but I'm encouraging the client to go out into the world and have new experiences apart from me.

In all these cases, the curative force is the almost visceral learning that occurs when new experiences contradict negative old experiences and expectations. Without real-world positive

practical experiences, insight can remain pretty abstract and theoretical.

But the combination of insight with corrective emotional experiences is usually exactly what the doctor ordered.