

Therapy

The Good , Bad and Ugly

Misconceptions about Therapy

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December, 2010

Most of us have an opinion about those who attend professional therapy. Positive or negative, these opinions are formed from the messages we received about emotional health when growing up, the messages we have received from popular culture, and the current experience of our peer group and friends.

When I grew up I was not aware of anyone who saw a therapist. There were perhaps a few friends of my parents that saw psychiatrists, mostly women seeking “mother’s little helper’s”, ie; Valium, but basically anyone with psychiatric disturbance was described as having a “nervous breakdown”, followed by a discrete hospitalization, and perhaps the return to a normal life. Unfortunately, prior to the advent of modern medication for depression and psychotic illness, treatment consisted of medications to sedate patients away from life stressors. Electroshock treatment was common, and the ultimate surgical remedy was a surgical lobotomy of the brain . I suspect severe mental illness treated in the public sector was geared toward the poor, alcoholic, and racially diverse.

These practices were not really so long ago. They continued into the 1960’s and 1970’s and even the 1980’s when the development of newer medications allowed the de-institutionalization of mental illness. When I grew up my mother worked as a Vocational Counselor at Crownsville State Hospital in Maryland. Crownsville was a State Mental Hospital. When patients were ready for release my mother helped them connect with aftercare housing and work. Because I grew up hearing her stories, I realize that mental health treatment as we know it is fairly new.

Films depicted mental health illness as either severely neurotic or psychotic and those stories that became films were profound. “One Flew Over the Cookoo’s Nest” was a Jack Nicholson classic. Who can recall this film without trepidation about the mental health system of the day? “Sybil” with Sally Field was another early dramatic portrait of very serious personality disturbance due to childhood sexual abuse, a condition hardly legitimized until the 1980’s. In more recent years, serious mental illness has given way to adjustment disturbances due sometimes to severe abuse or deprivation, but with consequences more amenable to therapy. In this time, therapy becomes a legitimate answer for those struggling with adolescent angst, “Girl Interrupted”, and for those struggling with poor childhoods, “ Good Will Hunting”. The popular new HBO series, “In Treatment”, is the modern version of Woody Allen’s therapy for the Everyman.

The truth is many psychiatric symptoms in the present respond very well to modern medication. People with debilitating anxiety, post partum depression, seasonal affective disorder, bipolar disorder, obsessive compulsive disorders, and even psychotic illness can be treated very effectively with medication. This allows many clients to have a substantially increased normal life with normal functioning.

Here are the misconceptions you may believe:

- **Therapy is just for very disturbed people.** (Wrong. Therapy is for anyone that needs help adjusting to situations that result in emotional symptoms).
- **Therapy is a long-term process that most people can't afford.** (Wrong. Most people attend 6-8 sessions that are covered in some part by insurance.)
- **Therapists are only interested in the dysfunction in your parents.** (Wrong. Most therapists want to help you meet your goals in the here and now.)
- **If you go to a therapist about a relationship, you will end up divorced.** (Wrong. Find a Marriage and Family Therapist that is supportive of marriage).
- **If I go to see a therapist they will just prescribe medication.** (Wrong. Therapists cannot prescribe medication. If I think you might be helped by medication, I will talk to you about that and help you connect with a doctor that will prescribe. That may well be your regular doctor.)
- **Therapists just talk to you. How can that help anymore than talking to my neighbor?** (Wrong. Therapists do use talk as the primary method of help, but we are trained in a variety of ways to ask questions, find patterns, teach coping skills, and counter negative beliefs, and the discussions are entirely confidential.)

Almost all studies of the benefits of psychiatric medication show best outcomes for those who incorporate a course of counseling. Counseling can help anyone develop better coping skills, counter negative attitudes, and create realistic goals. These outcomes do not happen from medication alone.

In today's world more and more people realize, along with their physicians, the benefits of professional counseling to help individuals realistically face their fears and anxiety, enact behaviors that counter depression, learn skills and strategies to deal with stress, and learn way to improve relationship assertiveness and communication effectiveness. Unlike decades before when clients would be in therapy for years, today's clients can gain tremendous gain in even 8-10 sessions.

What to Expect

There is a difference in clinical licensure that has implications for you. A psychologist, a PhD. in psychology can counsel you and also administer and interpret personality testing to obtain very specific diagnosis regarding learning, intelligence, and personality disorders. A social worker is trained in a variety of mental health procedures and is the only profession besides psychology that is approved at this time to see Medicare clients. Social workers are often involved in social institutions such as child welfare and hospitals. Professional Counselors have come originally from the school counseling field. Today's Professional Counselors include most all addiction specialists, pastoral counselors, school counselors, career counselors, and clinically trained counselors. Marriage and Family Therapists are specially trained to deal with marriage and family concerns. All trained therapists should be licensed in their state: LCSW, LPC, LMFT. You should look for a therapist experienced in working with your presenting issue with several years of clinical practice, who accepts your insurance. Definitely choose a therapist you feel comfortable with!

You should expect a small amount of paperwork on your first visit. If you are unsure of you mental health benefits, we will help you determine this in your first or second visit. Most insurance plans cover mental health benefits. You may have a deductible to meet. Deductibles are generally total health deductibles, which combine other health expenses. After that, you may have a co-pay or co-insurance

percentage to meet at each visit. Some insurance plans will state on the card the deductible payment. If you are part of the N.C. State Employee Plan, you will owe \$45.00 per visit (2010). If you have a BCBS out of state plan you will need a pre-authorization through the managed network for mental health.

You may pay your co-pay by cash, check, or charge card (except for American Express).

The First Visit

It's important that I understand who "the players" are in your life. I will take a brief social history of you and your partner, if you come for help in your relationship. I want to know the names of those important in your life, their ages, and how these relationships are going. I ask for this information because these are often your natural supports as well as the stresses of your responsibilities. We will then talk about those things that are troubling you at this time. Common issues include problems with children, problems with parents or siblings, parental divorce, friends, romantic relationships, school, work, crisis situations involving drugs, alcohol, death, accidents, violence, marital infidelity, childhood physical or sexual abuse. In addition you may have clinical conditions of depression or anxiety. I will help you define what would be a good outcome from counseling and together we will determine some goals that feel achievable and helpful.

The Counseling Process

Our scheduled hour, which is really 50 minutes, together is yours. I can be active or a good supportive listener. You must decide what is helpful for you. Part of good mental health is to feel supported, worthwhile, and to ventilate thoughts and feelings. I will always help with this and this may be the sum total of our work. Overtime I may also help you clarify what your goals are and help you become more effective. I have worked as a therapist for over ten years. There is no thought, sentiment, or behavior that will surprise me. I will never judge your thoughts or behaviors. I will always encourage you to be as honest as possible with me.

Our sessions are completely confidential unless you give me permission to work with others on your behalf. You may feel free to say whatever is on your mind. I encourage clients to drop the masks and socially expected or appropriate stances, and deal with their real feelings. I have found that this allows individuals to make decisions that honor their innermost selves and leads to lasting change.

I am generally pro-marriage, pro reconciliation, pro forgiveness of others. I am a Christian by faith. I may refer you to others to help consolidate your values, and I will ask you to call upon your values in living your life and to consider the consequences of living by impulse or circumstance. I will not force my beliefs upon you in any way but I may introduce them if I believe you may benefit.

Most clients come for weekly or biweekly sessions for about three months. We together determine progress and review your goals. I often see clients and their families for periods of years, occasionally as new problems emerge. I am honored to be part of the lives of my clients.

And, since Greenville is a small town, let me tell you how I will handle chance encounters. I often run into previous or current clients out and about. I will not acknowledge you unless you do so first. Please know I really don't recall every part of each person's problem, so when I see you I am just happy to see you. I don't need to know how things are going. That said, there are some clients I have become so fond of, I can't help but say hello.

Therapy is a unique business, truly personal, but also a business. I do expect clients to pay for services as they occur. Sometimes the business aspect of a personal relationship, and the struggle around it, can help clients work out boundaries they might need to have in other areas of their lives.

A long time ago, families kept their problems locked behind closed doors. This has almost always never been helpful. Today, individuals have the ability to take advantage of trained professionals who can “walk beside them” for a brief period of time, when life deals harsh realities, when natural supports live hours away, or even when you just need a professional opinion. Take advantage of this. You have choices.

Please call for a consultation today!