THE CATALYST

Everything you always wanted to know about therapy but were afraid to ask

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By: Yvette Murray | Posted: September 28, 2023

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Choosing to go to therapy may feel scary and overwhelming. Some may even have the belief that a therapist tells you what to do to 'solve' your problem. Therapy over the years has been stigmatized, but as we become more aware of mental health, the stigma has lessened.

Imagine having a person give you their undivided attention with no interruptions, empathizing, and providing professional guidance on what you may be experiencing. Can you imagine how supportive and life-changing this can be? Going to therapy was a life changer for me, and to this day, I still enjoy its benefits.

In this post, I'll share with you the various types of therapy, qualities to look for in a therapist and some ideas on where to find them.

Knowing when to seek therapy

You may be experiencing a temporary problem that can be helped with supportive family/friends or your own 'toolbox,' but at times, you might need professional support for what you are experiencing. It may be time to see a therapist when something is causing you ongoing distress and interferes with your life in the following ways:

- the quality of your life has decreased significantly or is decreasing
- your daily activities, school, work, or relationships are being negatively impacted
- feeling controlled by symptoms
- there is a risk of harm to yourself or others

You may also be experiencing:

- feeling overwhelmed or fatigued
- disproportionate anger, rage, resentment
- feeling anxious, panic, intrusive thoughts
- apathy, hopelessness
- shame, social withdrawal

Like myself, you may also choose therapy for ongoing support once the problem/crisis has been managed.

Not all therapies are the same

Depending on what you are experiencing, there is a wide range of therapies available. Remember, therapy can involve all aspects of your humanness, mind, body, and spirit. Sometimes, I need support physically (for example, naturopath, massage, acupuncture, osteopath, etc.), which in turn ends up assisting my mental health too. I'm amazed at the connection between the mind and body. When something is manifesting physically, it can create a risk to one's mental health, and when the mind is experiencing symptoms, it can directly impact you physically. For example, the symptoms of a panic attack are eerily like that of a heart attack.

Here are a few different approaches to therapy:

- psychoanalysis
- behavioural therapy
- cognitive therapy
- integrative or holistic therapy

Psychodynamic therapy is based on the principles of psychoanalysis and is an in-depth form of talk therapy. This form of therapy involves recognizing, acknowledging, and overcoming negative feelings and repressed emotions to improve the client's relationship with themselves, with others and with the world around them. With Behavioral Therapy, the basis is that certain behaviours develop from things you've learned in your past and that behavioural therapy can help you change your responses to those behaviours.

Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) is another form of behavioural therapy often used to treat mental health conditions and substance use disorders. This form of therapy focuses on the connection between thoughts, feelings, and behaviours.

Integrative or holistic therapy considers the whole person, mind, body, and spirit. These modalities can also be a wonderful complement to conventional treatment. Within the above-mentioned categories, there are a variety of more specialized approaches that can be found here .

Choosing a therapist

While it's natural to want to make a connection with a therapist, remember that they aren't your friends. Also, keep in mind that while they might have personality traits that you don't mesh with personally, that doesn't mean you can't still nurture a productive, professional relationship. Here are some qualities to look for in a therapist:

- meet professional qualifications and standards
- non-judgmental and empathetic
- diverse
- genuine
- compassionate
- flexible, but with healthy boundaries
- self-aware and connected to their humanness

Also, when a therapist is connected to a network of other professionals, they may be able to refer you to others who may support your journey further.

One size does not fit all

You are an important part of the therapeutic relationship. The therapist you are working with may not be the best-suited one for you, and that's OK! I remember my very first experience with a therapist, and after a few sessions, there wasn't much progress. The therapist was lovely and empathetic and provided a safe space for me. However, I needed someone who would challenge me, go deeper, and provide the opportunity for me to grow and heal. Working with my next therapist provided the opportunity for me to do just that. Letting my previous therapist know that I didn't think we were a fit was challenging, but it did provide me the opportunity to speak my truth, and I grew stronger as a result. I believe that there are no "waste of time" therapeutic experiences. It's true; therapists are all as individual and unique as you are.

Where to find a therapist

There is a wide range of therapeutic services available. Considering the resources available to you, checking in with a medical doctor is a great place to start. They will look to provide you with a referral. It's important to note there may be waitlists. Getting your name on the waitlist as soon as possible may prove the wait was worth it. In the meantime, support from friends and family may be helpful. Depending on the type of therapy you are looking for, there may be costs involved. I suggest checking in with your work for any benefit plans they may have. Most companies have incorporated therapy into their benefit offerings. Some therapists provide a sliding scale; depending on your financial situation, they will customize a fee. There are also low or no financial costs provided through non-profit and government-funded programs. In most provinces, there are 211 websites that have great mental health service resources.

On a final note: therapy gave me the ability to heal, grow, and be of service to others while being in care of myself. It wasn't always easy; however, it was worth it every step of the way! As Brene Brown says, "Truth and courage aren't always comfortable, but they are never weakness."

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Lives in Tiny Beaches on Georgian Bay, which she considers her sanctuary. She believes that being surrounded by nature does wonders for her mental health. Yvette is the author of The Mental Health Contagion: Navigating Yourself Through a Loved One's Mental Well-Being Decline (forthcoming). Yvette is a mental health advocate, influencer, and keynote speaker; a psychotherapist; and a facilitator for the MHCC's Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) virtual certification program. MHFA is available for those who are supporting adults, youth, and/or older adults. It trains participants on how to recognize a loved one's mental health problem, have that conversation, and get the best help.

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