

# Five things a psychotherapist wants you to know

Telling people you're a psychotherapist is an instant conversation stopper. For all our interest in wellbeing, there remains a taboo about the topic of mental health and psychotherapy. Perhaps it's a fear of someone rooting around in your past, or anxiety about receiving confirmation of what so many fear: being flawed. Or maybe you dread the thought of being trapped into a lifetime of therapy. Or perhaps you have resigned yourself to always feeling this way. As a psychotherapist who has been practising for more than 20 years, there are five things I'd like you to know



## 1 Therapy doesn't mean unduly dredging up the past

In the past two decades, we have made great advances in neuroscience, understanding how the mind, body and emotions interact – and what constitutes good therapy.

Effective therapy can be practical, focus on solutions and help people out of their crisis or stagnation to become better again, very quickly. More spectacularly, though, I often see people outgrowing their previous best self. They emerge as growing, thriving individuals, with more satisfying relationships.

Using the most up-to-date insights, emotions that control unhelpful patterns of thought and behaviour can be released, without unduly digging into the past. Then we focus on shaping a balanced life that works.

Good counsel is often a positive experience – an opportunity to stand back from your life and to reflect upon it. It helps to see your difficulties in a new light, look to a brighter future and move forward.

## 2 A good therapist can help you develop your own resources and equip you for the future – even in the short term

Just as a coach can help to draw out the talents of a dancer, designer or sportswoman, a good therapist can help you become skilled at drawing out and developing the resources you need to continue growing, experiencing your life as more meaningful, and better able to handle life's natural ups and downs as they happen.

These are exceptionally turbulent, unpredictable and confusing times. The rising tides of stress and discontent in the workplace spill over into demanding and complicated private lives. In this pace, it's necessary to relearn how to bolster yourself, develop resilience and give meaning to your life. And this is no longer just for those suffering with insomnia, lack of focus, anxiety, depression, anger or addictive behaviour. Everyone needs to relearn what it is to be fully human. And is there anyone you know who couldn't benefit from some effective tools to address 'routine' stress?

With a good therapist, you can learn to amplify and build upon your talents as well as discover what you need to sustain your mental health – and practical ways to do so.

*‘Through therapy, you see your life through fresh eyes. You detect unhelpful patterns of behaviour and notice the repetitive thoughts you hold as truth, that keep you feeling stuck’*

### 3 Therapy can help you understand the role of your emotions

Neuroscience unequivocally tells us that our opinions, thoughts and behaviours are all driven by emotion. It underlies even our most rational functioning, serving as the driver to steer us through life.

The more emotionally aroused you are, the less subtle your thinking. In other words, the more black-and-white the cognitive processes become. You incline to taking things personally, see your state of affairs as permanent and your relationships become brittle.

Chronic stress has become the new norm, and it's easy to forget what a calm state feels like. Therapy can teach you to create more emotional spare capacity and bring more of your emotional, creative intelligence online.

No longer at the mercy of raw, primal emotions, but more subtly informed and in a position to choose your responses sensitively, you start to feel liberated.

### 4 Therapy can help you understand yourself better

Throughout the ages people have been encouraged by sages to become acquainted with themselves. Terry Waite and Nelson Mandela agreed that their years of solitary confinement gave them that extraordinary opportunity. The strength and compassion it gave them is indisputable.

How much are your held opinions your own? How closely have you examined their origin or validity?

Through therapy, you see your life through fresh eyes. You detect unhelpful patterns of behaviour and notice the repetitive thoughts you hold as truth, that keep you feeling stuck. This could be anything from procrastination, avoidance of important conversations or going around saying that ‘if only you'd have time to...’.

With the help of a good therapist, you can break those patterns, and break free from this emotional rigidity or even from past trauma.

For example, a man I was working with realised how the process of change made him anxious. As the years of his life wore on, the number of variables he needed to control increased, leaving him eternally stressed and bad-tempered.

He had never learned to deal with change or handle ambiguity – the art of not knowing. Together we worked to develop his ability to embrace change, tolerate the discomfort of uncertainty and improve his communication skills.

You will see how addressing even one habit or thought can open up and refresh your experience of life.

### 5 Reframe your life story

The way a picture is framed can significantly affect your appreciation of it. Framing a child's painting will add gravitas to the effort. Try it.

Listen to the story you tell about your life. What meaning do you give to good fortune? How do you make sense of hardship and disappointment? Loss, grief or any other setback often becomes a new threshold for people. Rather than staying stuck in the ruins of what was, they choose to see it as an opportunity to change and grow. In that way their pain transforms into wisdom, compassion or a greater sense of who they are.

Therapy offers ways to make sense of the haphazard chaos of our lives. It helps us cross new thresholds with dignity and hope and it gives us courage to be vulnerable and helps release the energy to connect with others and live meaningful lives.

To quote the much loved Irish poet John O'Donohue:

‘We too often linger for years in spaces that are too small and shabby for the grandeur of our spirit.’

Reframing your life story gives you the choice to see that ‘a life that continues to remain on the safe side of its own habits and repetitions, that never engages with its own possibility, remains an un-lived life’.

Finally, I'd like you to know that it is possible to feel better – and whether you are suffering from stress, anxiety, depression, addiction, anger outbursts, or you're feeling stuck, that life is out of balance or not working for you – effective help is out there.

Good, modern therapy can be a way to improve the quality of your life and consulting a therapist could be the surest sign of how much you value it.

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