

# ***Engaged Community Project Behavioral Health Partnership***

## **Therapy: Frequently Asked Questions:**

### **What is therapy?**

Therapy, also called psychotherapy or counseling, is the process of meeting with a therapist to resolve problematic behaviors, beliefs, feelings, relationship issues, and/or somatic responses (sensations in the body). Beginning therapy can be a big step toward being the healthiest version of one's self and living the best life possible—no matter what challenges one may be facing. Through therapy, one can change self-destructive behaviors and habits, resolve painful feelings, improve your relationships, and more.

Though no one can tell you exactly what your therapy process will be like, in all modes of therapy you will establish goals for your therapy and determine the steps you will take to get there. Whether in individual, group, or family therapy, your relationship with your therapist is a confidential one and focuses not only on the content of what you talk about, but also the process. The therapeutic process—how you share your feelings and experiences—is just as important as the specific issues or concerns you share in therapy.

On the whole, you can expect that your therapist will be someone who supports you, listens attentively, models a healthy and positive relationship experience, gives you appropriate feedback, and follows ethical guidelines. Good therapy should be tailored to you and your experiences.

### **What is family therapy?**

Families seek therapy with a family counselor for many different reasons. Some members of the family may not understand the purpose of going to family therapy, or why family counseling is more effective when all members of the family unit attend. The purpose of family therapy is to help families work through struggles, challenges, and tough times in a way that doesn't simply have the problem go away, but makes the family stronger. Almost all families enter into therapy because something unpleasant is going on—the illness of a child, addictions, behavioral problems, or relational problems. These stressors take a toll on everyone. Family therapy is a means to help cope with these stressors, which is different than making them go away. Letting go is often a part of family therapy—letting go of expectations so we can heal and embrace our present reality while working to a better future. When we try too hard to change circumstances or people without first accepting the truth of “what is,” we can inadvertently move in the wrong direction. But, when we learn to accept what is, and bring intentionality to the processes of how we cope, get along, and respond to each other, we can change the patterns of the family in good ways. Family therapy is about using the power of relationships and love to support each member to be as healthy and whole as possible, which in turn creates a healthier family.

### **I am nervous about therapy, is that normal?**

If you are about to have your first therapy session, you may be nervous, skeptical, or downright frightened about starting. Most people have a natural fear of the unknown, which may be contributing to your feelings. Feeling nervous is not only normal, it's expected—especially if it's your first time. Think about it—on one level, therapy is a strange relationship. You're expected to spill your guts to a perfect stranger, trusting that they will get you, have empathy for you, and can help you cope with the difficult situation that brought you to counseling in the first place. And, you aren't going to find out that much about the stranger—maybe ever. It's weird. On top of that, the things you are spilling about aren't pretty, not to you anyway. They are things that make you sad, depressed, angry, afraid, or anxious. Often, these

are things that you are ashamed and embarrassed to admit to yourself, much less tell someone else. But, the strangest thing of all is that it works.

It can be a relief to be able to talk to someone who doesn't have a stake in the outcome of your life—other than that you achieve your goals and be happy. It's nice to be able to focus on yourself and not have to worry about the other person. It's comforting to be with someone who is witness to your struggle and who really DOES care about you. People who become therapists can connect emotionally with others, to develop empathic bonds with them, and to hear about pain endlessly. In fact, we thrive on this kind of interaction and connection. Helping others in this way gives meaning to our lives. So, it's normal to be nervous about therapy, but a good therapist will put you at ease so that even if it is difficult to tell your story, somehow you will feel better and more hopeful for having told it—perhaps even a little bit lighter than when you first came in.

### **What will it be like?**

Many people who have never participated in a therapy session wonder what it will be like. Will the therapist ask you a lot of questions about your feelings? Will he or she ask you to discuss your fears? Will you have to talk about your childhood? The truth is that different therapists handle their first therapy sessions differently. They may even encourage you to ask them questions about their lives, training, or experience. Typically, in your first session, your therapist will spend some time getting to know you and the challenges that you are experiencing. He or she may use a formal, structured interview, or it may just feel like a more free-flowing conversation. The therapist will ask questions about your concerns, as well as your history and background. Most likely, you'll find yourself talking about your current symptoms or struggles, as well saying a bit about your relationships, your interests, your strengths, and your goals.

Most importantly, in that first session, you will begin making a connection with your therapist. You should feel safe, accepted, respected, and relatively comfortable. Not all therapists are right for every person, so use your first session to assess whether the therapist you chose feels like a good match for your personality.

There are different approaches in family therapy and therapists use different methods to obtain the information gathering that takes place in the first session. Typically, the therapist will have you all together for at least part of the session, both to hear everyone's view of the problem that brought you to counselling, and to see how you all interact with each other and what roles you play in the family. She or he will attempt to get the perspective of each family member on several important dimensions, not just the presenting problem. The therapist may interview sub-units separately, like the parents, for example, or even spend time with everyone individually. The therapist will explain his or her rules for sessions—like confidentiality of information disclosed within the family, or who needs to attend ongoing sessions and who perhaps does not. It is sometimes not practical or necessary for everyone to be present

More important than what happens, is how you feel during and after the session. Everyone needs to see the therapist as on the side of the family, not on the side of a particular member. No one should feel that the therapist blames them for the problem unfairly, or that the counselor has favorites. You should see the therapist as caring—but also as competent. You should have some feelings of hopefulness, that the therapist might be able to help, that it's worth coming back next time.

*Source: GoodTherapy.org*