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FOCUS

Psychotherapy Works—Here's Proof

There are many who believe that problems like depression, anxiety, and other mood disorders represent character flaws that should be overcome; not illnesses that can be effectively treated. The attitude is sometimes generational—older folks often look at therapy as an indulgence or a sign of weakness. Sometimes it reflects a sense of hopelessness, and sometimes it concerns compulsions, phobias, or problems that hold such sway that people believe there is nothing therapy could do to help.

WHAT'S THIS REALLY ABOUT?

All too often these days, the recommended fix for such problems is to take a pill—and in truth, some people really do need medication. But while psychopharmaceuticals have come a long way in terms of helping to alleviate symptoms, and they are sometimes a necessary and reasonable first step, patients need to address their underlying issues as well. That's what psychotherapy is for—healing the cause of the disturbance. However, it's no longer acceptable for "therapy" to amble aimlessly along as in a Woody Allen movie—evidence based standards have now crept into the practice of psychotherapy. This may bode well for treatment of emotional issues.

THE GOALS OF THERAPY

Just like with orthopedic issues, heart disease and other medical problems, researchers now evaluate which types of psychotherapeutic treatment offer the best outcomes for which types of patients. This will never be black and white, mind you—experts argue that in the right therapists' hands, *all* styles of psychotherapy are helpful, since it is the dynamic between the therapist and patient that brings results. Even so, researchers recently evaluated the purpose and success rates of two of today's most popular approaches to therapy—*cognitive behavioral therapy* (CBT) and *psychodynamic therapy*—affirming that each can be very effective. Their compelling results may help convince some people who are suffering that therapists have more to offer than just a sympathetic ear—they really can help.

CHANGE YOURSELF, CHANGE YOUR WORLD

Developed in the 1960's, CBT refers to a style of counseling that is relatively short-term (typically 20 sessions or less over five to six months). CBT does not dwell on the past but instead is intently focused on how you think, behave, and communicate in your

daily life. This research was reviewed by Timothy B. Baker, PhD, of the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health, Madison, and published in *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*. In CBT, patients learn to identify the thoughts, images, and beliefs that are causing problems in their lives, and then to reframe them in order to get better results. Therapy sessions help them see how their thoughts shape their behavior, which in turn affects what happens in their lives. *Example:* CBT is particularly helpful for post-traumatic stress disorders; not only for soldiers returning from war, but also for people who have been victims of violence or accidents, and even those who have witnessed terrifying events. Patients learn how the body reacts to trauma by string emotional reactions and producing physical symptoms instead, even long after the triggering event. They practice different ways of thinking and learn relaxation techniques to use in certain types of situations. In a process called systemic desensitization, some are then gradually exposed to anxiety-producing situations so that they can practice responding more appropriately. CBT often involves homework, such as keeping a journal and practicing techniques learned during therapy sessions. Dr. Baker's research found that after a number of sessions (up to 15), 40%-87% of patients show significant improvement, meaning that they have less anxiety and are able to cope better with the anxiety that they do have. According to Dr. Baker, patients with anxiety disorders including panic disorder or PTSD who undergo CBT more than double the likelihood that they'll get better.

PSYCHODYNAMIC THERAPY

The second method, psychodynamic therapy, has been around longer than CBT and has its roots in Freudian psychoanalysis. It considers how past experience—often from long ago—shapes people and their lives, not only in ways that are readily apparent, but also on a more subtle level. Therapy sessions usually take place once a week and focus on the psychological roots of patients' emotional suffering. The treatment may extend over five or six months, or it could be open-ended, lasting a year or more. Patients' goals include:

- Being able to accept and express feelings about



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Psychotherapy Works—Here's Proof (continued)

the past and use this understanding to improve life in the present, including personal relationships.

- To apply lessons learned through their relationship in therapy (with the therapist) to other relationships in their lives—hopefully, even future ones.
- To explore the full range of emotional and mental life (including desires, wishes, fears, dread, fantasies, dreams and daydreams) and use all of it to live more fully in the present.

Jonathan Shedler, PhD, from the University of Colorado School of Medicine, reviewed a large number of meta-analyses (compilation of research studies) that involved many thousand of patients to write this report. It was published in the February-March 2010 issue of *American Psychologist*. Dr. Shedler's study

evaluated a range of common mental disorders, including depression, anxiety, and somatic conditions (physical symptoms that can be rooted in psychological causes), noting that these were often mixed with personality problems and relationship difficulties. Not only was the psychodynamic therapy successful in the short run for all types of problems, but his reporting improvement in every problem area (including depression, anxiety and physical symptoms) even though they were no longer seeing their therapists. *Especially intriguing*: Dr. Shedler reported that among studies in the analysis that included data on health-care utilization, 77.8% reported significant reductions in medical treatment. It seemed that for these patients, learning to address their emotional difficulties helped bring about physical well-being as well.

SKILLS AND TOOLS

While these reports describe two approaches to psychotherapy, in actual practice many

therapists use both methods and others, too. Good psychotherapists need skills and tools—not one or the other. Emotional problems are both painful and real, and these studies offer concrete evidence that may help convince some doubters that psychotherapy can be good medicine.

Source(s): Timothy B. Baker, PhD, professor of medicine, University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health, Madison.

Jonathan Shedler, PhD, associate professor of psychiatry, University of Colorado School of Medicine, and director of psychology, University of Colorado Outpatient Psychiatry Service, Aurora, Colorado.

What Every Parent Needs to Know About Their Children & Sexting

One would be hard pressed in today's society to not notice that cell phones have become mere extensions of a teenager's hand (and pre-teens more and more)—there has even been an entirely new language invented to go along with this age of electronic communication. However, Carpal Tunnel Syndrome is not the only worry parents today should have when it comes to their children and cell phones. No, parents today need to worry about something far more life-changing than CTS. "Sexting" is defined as sending sexually explicit photographs to someone else electronically, often from one cell phone to another. It's basically a text message that includes a nude or semi-nude photograph. It's a fairly recent phenomenon and one that more and more teenagers are engaging in—and some are facing prison time for it. That's right, prison time. They might also face a lifetime of being labeled as a sex offender. Sexting is illegal. It is not specifically mentioned in any law, but it does fall under "Child Pornography". Under the current child pornography law, sexting can be a felony. Imagine your 15-year-old daughter who has a momentary lapse of reason like most teenager at some point, takes a semi nude picture of herself and sends it to her boyfriend. That one act can lead to her being prosecuted for dissemination of child pornography—she is also passing along nude or semi-nude photos of a minor, even if the minor is herself. The same is true if her boyfriend forwards the photo to one

of his friends. And if his friend has the photo on his phone, he too may be violating child pornography laws. It's estimated that 20% of teenagers have participated in sexting at some point. It's probably a lot higher than that, meaning many have not admitted to it. In many instances, the pictures are seen by more than just the recipient—they are passed along to friends and classmates. Not surprisingly, sexting has drawn a lot of attention, as well as concern from parents, schools, and law enforcement. Lawmakers in more than a dozen states believe that punishing sexting as child pornography is too harsh and are working to create laws specifically for the phenomenon of texting. Under the proposed laws, sexting among teens would be a misdemeanor. Punishment would include court ordered community service and counseling. Forwarding or disseminating nude photos of someone else may carry a harsher penalty. Lawmakers are probably right—teens who make a one-time stupid mistake shouldn't face such severe consequences that can destroy the rest of their lives. But most teens don't know sexting is illegal and many don't think about or understand the consequences of their actions. Often, parents are unaware of the activity altogether. The difficulty is in constructing laws in a way that protect our children from true child predators, yet shield them from the mistakes youth tend to make. Parents need to let teens know that it is not only illegal to send such photos, but it's illegal

to request them from someone else. Most importantly, if they receive a sexually explicit photo, they should delete it from their phone right away. Simply having the photo on your phone could get you in trouble. And passing it along to others is not only illegal, but it could lead to civil liability for invasion of privacy or defamation. As with drug use, unprotected sex, etc., these conversations are never comfortable, and you hope your child is not participating in the activity—but it is better to have open communication than face harsh consequences down the road from ignoring the problem.

Source: Michael Heflan has been a Chicago attorney since 1997 with a focus on workers' compensation matters. In 2001 he launched a state wide network of like-minded attorneys who talk in plain English, only pursue legitimate cases and fight for their clients. Mike recognized that the facts of the case should determine who the right lawyer is for a case. His network makes that goal a reality and the 20+ lawyers he partners with state wide have achieved unmatched success for their clients.

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A Motivation Trick

A recent study in the *Journal of Consumer Research* suggests that clenching one's muscles can enhance self-control. Participants in several studies were instructed to tighten their muscles—hand, finger, calf, or biceps—when exposed to various self-control dilemmas. Regardless of which muscles were flexed, participants showed a greater ability to exert self-control and accept immediate discomfort for long term gain. Authors, Iris W. Hung (National University of Singapore) and Aparna A. Labroo (University of Chicago) found that the muscle tightening was effective only if the choice was congruent with the participants' goals (for example, a healthier lifestyle). Additionally, rehearsing this technique before the actual situation was presented tended to exhaust participants. Rather, tightening their muscles at the time of

the dilemma was found most effective. "The mind and the body are so closely tied together, merely clenching muscles can also activate willpower," the authors write. "Thus simply engaging in these bodily actions, which often result from an exertion of willpower, can serve as a non-conscious source to recruit willpower, facilitate self-control, and improve consumer wellbeing."

Source: Iris W. Hung and Aparna A. Labroo. From Firm Muscles to Firm Willpower: Understanding the Role of Embodied Cognition in Self-Regulation. *Journal of Consumer Research*.



How To Survive Change You Didn't Ask For

Half of your retirement savings disappeared virtually overnight...your employer went out of business...a routine physical turned up a serious health problem. Adjusting to change is particularly difficult when change is both unwanted and unexpected. Sudden, life-altering events can create a paralyzing sense of lost control and dashed dreams. Important strategies for surviving unexpected change... **ENGAGE IN AT LEAST ONE ACTIVITY EVERY DAY THAT YOU CAN COMPLETELY CONTROL.** It's normal to feel like a helpless victim when an unwanted change turns your life upside down. But you can start to shed these feelings of powerlessness by taking up a hobby or pursuing a goal that involves no one's effort or assent but your own. **Example:** A woman whose husband left her dedicated herself to running a marathon. **FAKE THE CONFIDENCE AND SKILLS YOU NEED TO REBOUND UNTIL YOU HAVE THEM.** **Example:** I used to be a terrible networker. To overcome this, I asked myself, "what would I do right now if I were a great networker?" Then I pretended that I was one. That got me out the door and talking to folks at networking events. Within weeks, I was no longer pretending—networking started to come naturally to me. **FOCUS ON WHERE YOU WANT TO BE A YEAR FROM NOW.** It's more useful—and more enjoyable—to look forward after an unwanted life change than it is to look back. Obsessing over backward-looking questions, such as, *Why did this happen to me?* and *What went wrong?*, rarely helps us rebound. Instead, view the current state of affairs not as a setback but as a starting point. When your mind drifts back to the way things once were, remind yourself, *This is where I am...Now, where am I going?* **CELEBRATE SUCCESSES.** Put even your tiniest accomplishments in your mental "win" col-

umn. This creates a sense that you're racking up wins, which builds positive energy and forward momentum. **Example:** If you lost your job, don't wait until you land a new one to view yourself as a winner—that would make you feel and act like a loser during job interviews. Set an achievable job-search goal each day, such as calling three potential employers...networking with a colleague in your field...or researching a potential employer. Then celebrate your accomplishment at the end of the day—*Hooray, I made progress*—and share it with others if possible. **CONSIDER WHY OPTIONS MIGHT WORK, EVEN IF YOU SUSPECT THEY WON'T.** It's easy to fall into the trap of "yes, but" thinking after unwanted changes happen to us. When we come up with a possible solution, we immediately think of a reason why this solution will fail and conclude that it isn't even worth trying. The problem isn't that the idea is flawed, but that recent setbacks have put us in a negative frame of mind. When you think of an option, force yourself also to think, *If I did this, here's how it might succeed.* **HELP OTHERS WITH THEIR PROBLEMS.** Helping puts our own problems in perspective...proves to us that we can accomplish change...and allows us to take a much-needed mental break from our own worries. **Example:** a woman forced from her home by wildfires discovered that collecting blankets for other victims helped her stop worrying about her home. **ENCOURAGE YOURSELF AS YOU WOULD A CHILD IN A FOOTRACE.** Tell yourself, *You can do it!* and *You're almost there!* Do this out loud or, if you're public, to yourself. It may feel silly, but hearing over-the-top encouragement really does provide a confidence boost, even when it comes from your own mouth. **SCHEDULE A 15-MINUTE DAILY "WORRY TIME."** Chronic worriers tend to

obsess about their problems, forcing out more productive thoughts during the day and preventing sleep at night. These people cannot stop worrying entirely, but they can contain their worrying to a specific block of time each day. Give yourself permission to worry during a particular 15 minutes each day, ideally at the time of day when your worries tend to be at their worst. When you catch yourself worrying at other times, remind yourself that you have a schedule, and promise yourself that you'll get all your worrying done then. Experiment with the best time to worry. If right before bed makes it hard for you to sleep, find another time. **GIVE ADVICE TO SOMEONE AND THEN TAKE THAT ADVICE YOURSELF.** It's often easier to analyze someone else's problem than it is your own. Our emotions and ego get in our way when we think about our own lives. **Example:** Think about what you would tell a friend to do to get her retirement savings back on track. Then follow your own advice. **REMINDE YOURSELF OF YOUR POSITIVE QUALITIES AND STRENGTHS.** Those facing unexpected problems tend to think about those problems much more than they think about the tools they have for overcoming them. Whenever your problems come to mind, mentally list your skills, your friends, and any other resources to help you rebound. Source: *Bottom Line/Personal* interviewed M.J. Ryan, a change expert with Professional Thinking Partners, a consultancy based in Park City, Utah. She is author of *AdaptAbility: How to Survive Change You Didn't Ask For* (Broadway Books). She is former CEO and editorial director of *Conari Press* and one of the creators of its best-selling series, *Random Acts of Kindness*. www.mj-ryan.com.



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A Story About Choice....

A wise, old grandfather said to his grandson who came to him with anger at a friend who had done him an injustice, "Let me tell you a story. I too, at times have felt a great hate for those that have taken so much, with no sorrow for what they do. But hate wears you down, and does not hurt those who have wronged you. I have struggled with these feelings many times. It is as if there are two wolves inside me. One is good and does no harm. He lives



in harmony with all around him. He is joy, peace, love, hope, humility, truth, compassion. He will only fight when it is right to do so, and in the right way. But the other wolf....He is full of anger. He fights everyone, all the time, for no reason. He is anger, envy, ego, greed, arrogance, resentment, lies, and false pride." The grandfather continued...."Sometimes it's hard to live with both these two wolves inside me, for both of them try to dominate my spirit." The boy looked intently into his grandfather's eyes and asked, "Which one wins, Grandfather?" The grandfather smiled and quietly said, "The one I feed."