



Your First Therapy Session

The first thing to look for when purchasing therapy, as in buying a used car, is knowing what you're looking for.

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“Life is the balance between holding on and letting go.”

— Rumi

Should You Be Prepared?

I felt it important to respond to a journalist who asked what people might expect at their first therapy session. Many come to me who are ambivalent about beginning therapy, and I've been to a few therapists myself. I've not felt good about these first sessions with other therapists.

The problem is always the therapist. I have only met one therapist who knew what she was doing, or, more accurately, who admitted she didn't know what she was doing. That was because this therapist had decades of experience. She was rare.

The more someone thinks they know, the more certainly they don't. A good therapist is wise but ignorant, and makes no attempt to hide it. No therapist is an expert because no two clients are the same.

An honest therapist knows as little about what to expect as you do. When I make my ignorance clear, everything goes beautifully because it's you who guides me. I've never met a therapist as comfortable with their ignorance as I.

The journalist's seven questions concern protocol, method, and service. These strike me as more pertinent for your first visit to the tax accountant or nutritionist.

Therapy is not about protocol, methods, or service. Such therapy is bullshit. If you're inviting someone to "therapise" you, you've lost your way at the start. No one is going to figure or straighten you out. You do this yourself, or else it doesn't happen.

Each of these questions is an opportunity to debunk the idea that someone can fix you. My answer to each one is that it's up to you. You are the driver, the motivator, the actor, the fixer, and the fixee. This is not a taxi ride to your destination. I can only be the driving instructor.

Your first visit to a therapist is like your first visit to an empty garden where nothing has yet been planted. Bring some tools and consider turning over some earth. The person with you—call them whatever you like—tries to understand your landscape and help you garden.

We can't live your life for you. Anyone who suggests some invasive action, such as taking drugs or following their playbook, is selling a commodity. They are plumbers with a truck full of pipe fittings.

I do this in my pitching the importance of brain training to people who don't know what it is. For most people this comes out of left field. Sometimes it makes them angry as they feel it's not what they've come for. Nevertheless, if I see that it's important, I'll bring it up

Where to Begin

1. Please share an intro quote about how going to therapy for the first time may be overwhelming or daunting but you don't have to feel that way.

Before becoming a professional therapist I thought therapy was for people who were having trouble meeting basic needs and expectations. Now, I see that is a minority. Many people are struggling with their abilities, not their disabilities. For them, counseling is more like mentoring, and their goal is to exceed what's expected of them.

Counseling is exploration, and you are the explorer and inventor. You're creating something both new and personal. A counselor can help you with your ideas and intuitions, but the focus is on your potential. This is not the medical model. I'm not your usual therapist.

There are clients who are or think they are disabled, and there are therapists who see you or want to see you in terms of a disability. This is your first and major choice. How do you see yourself, how do you want to be seen, and what do you want to do about it?

Should You Feel Daunted?

2. Please walk us through what people should do BEFORE their first session with a therapist to get ready and feel prepared and be less nervous.

People come to therapy with a problem. If this is definitive and exclusive, then there is not much more to say. The goal of therapy will be to change their minds.

In the first session with someone, I listen to their story. I don't believe the story is accurate, but people need to tell it. The larger and less well defined your story is, the more freedom you have. But if your problem is unclear, most therapists will try to bring it into focus. Here is where you must be careful: most therapist need focus and they'll pigeon-hole you in order to get it. They start looking in the same wrong places that you are.

Resist the therapist's encouragement to define yourself and your condition. Look for a therapist who can see or who is interested to learn about all that you can or want to be. Rather than detailing your problems, explain you goals and means.

A good therapist will be creative and comfortable in your confusion. A therapist who agrees with your diagnosis and offers a path through it, is not useful. They are falling into the box that you've created for yourself.

Beware of anyone who has a preconception of who you are. In this, you are the worst offender. Recognize that even you don't know who you are. You are entering counseling because you are different.

You Are a Boat At Dock

3. So you enter the room or join the virtual web link and are about to start your first session, please walk us through exactly what to expect at a first therapy session in the first few minutes.

We are our stories, but we have several, and several selves who tell them. Engaging a therapist is like catching a fish. First, you bait them, and then you set the hook. But you must be discerning. Are you fishing for sailfish or old shoes?

A good therapist will present a challenge. If they don't, it may be you whom they are catching. You're looking for a therapist who is workable, not likeable.

Begin by creating scenarios and asking the therapist what they would do. Get them to expose themselves. Most therapists are taught to avoid revealing too much about themselves. People who don't show themselves don't know themselves. Avoid them.

Don't be afraid to contradict yourself. You are not taking a test, you are giving one. And the test you are giving should reflect the unsolveability of your problem. The therapist may want to know all about you, but if you knew that, you wouldn't need them. Aim to confuse. Reject simplification, as that is not an accurate picture of yourself.

Start With the Facts

4. After the intro part of the session, what should patients expect for the remainder of the first meeting? Should they take notes during or after the session? Should they expect to listen more than talk? Will the therapist go through any standard questions with them?

I ask new clients to complete an online intake form before we meet. That way, I've got the basic contact information and medical permission. They also sign an online Informed Consent form. With those out of the way, I'm ready to field whatever you pitch at me.

Most likely, you've heard your story before. What you want to see is how the therapist reacts and how quickly they understand. Be aware of what you're providing and whether the therapist accepts it, questions it, understand it, and sees beyond it.

If the therapist just "doesn't get it," then you're talking to the wrong person. If they understand you before you've finished the story, and even more so if they've been there themselves, then you've got a person who's survived the territory.

I have clients who live in strange worlds that are hard to imagine. If I can't commiserate, then I can't speak their language and nothing will come of it. I make my lost feelings as clear as possible, and I leave the decision of how to continue up to them.

As a client, you're trying to get the therapist up to speed. If they go in a different direction, that could be what you need. But if they're off-base, their insight will be limited. In all sessions, you are testing the therapist, and they are being called to deliver. That's why you pay them.

I have a few clients who annoy me; they're angry, confrontational, and accusative. These are generally low performing people, but not always. They are interesting. Why do they think being adversarial is helpful? Why do they think I'm their enemy? Their extreme, uncontrolled emotions are at the root of their troubles. They must embody these feelings before they can understand them.

When you're emotional, or make someone else emotional, you're recreating a drama. If truly representing yourself involves crying, yelling, or freezing, then you'll do better by overplaying. This helps make distinctions clear for everyone. A good therapist can make it into something positive.

Much of therapy is communication. You're responsible for your half, and the therapist is responsible for theirs. Therapists who don't communicate emotionally have little to offer. This is the real skill of the therapist. It's not knowledge, it's the ability to share your drama without being sucked into it.

Always Look Forward

5. Before the session wraps up, what are some good ideas for things the patient can do or ask the therapist before concluding.

I always give my clients “homework.” This is something for them to do or think about. It is my answer to the question, “Where are we going?” You should leave every session with some actionable idea. Unlike school homework, this should be meaningful.

If a therapist does not try to create something useful, you should ask for it. If you don’t ask for it and they don’t offer it, then either the therapist is clueless, you’re clueless, or you’re going to make no progress.

I distinguish mental illness from challenging situations according to whether or not a person can change. If you’re certain of your delusions, then there will be little change. In this sense, I see heartbreak as a mental illness. In contrast, a person who is challenged but motivated to try is struggling with a limited situation, not a limited ability.

Study Your Decisions

6. You didn't like the therapist. Now what? Should patients be afraid of offending therapists? What if you liked them but want to share feedback on how you thought something could be improved?

Forget like-ability. Therapists should not be your friends. They should be clear about this. They should not affirm your opinions or indulge your fantasies. What you want is progress and change. Therapy for change is challenging.

I have a client who is always looking for disagreement. Okay, I give it to him. He rarely agrees with anything I say. I have another client whose personality changes by the minute, ranging from accusative to defeated. I encourage this hostility because it’s otherwise invisible to them. But I also won’t excuse or overlook it because, for them, therapy is learning to better perceive the interplay between their thoughts and feelings.

The therapist’s goal is to become unnecessary. The client has only to make an effort, and to evaluate their progress. If you’re making no progress, find another therapist. You’ll still have to make an effort, but you might be more effective with a different person.

Make Everything an Opportunity

7. What else is important to share about how people can prepare for their first time in therapy?

I encourage therapy and coaching. The difference between the two lies in how you see yourself. If you think you’re disabled, then go to therapy. If you are capable but obstructed, then go to coaching. If you’re somewhere in between, call it counseling.

A good therapist/coach must play both roles because we embody both roles. The object is to move from disability to ability; to find the motivation to become more able. Your objectives are an obligation, and everyone around you will benefit from your progress. A therapist may not agree, understand, or befriend you, but if they can open your future, they're worth it.

***If you'd like to begin counseling, therapy, or coaching,
schedule a free call on my calendar:***

<https://www.mindstrengthbalance.com/schedule15>