How Does Psychotherapy Help?

If you are starting (or continuing) in psychotherapy, you certainly have a right to know: how is this supposed to make things better for me? Why do people sometimes get mentally healthier as a result of doing this? What happens differently for the people who benefit, from the people who don't -- what do they do differently?

Let's first examine about some of the ideas people have, coming into psychotherapy, that often don't serve them well. One is that in "talk therapy," if you talk enough about what is going on in your life, your life will get better. Sometimes things work out this way, but sometimes people can come and talk for years without getting much better. For the people who don't get better, there's a missing ingredient in the talk.

Another idea is that a therapist is someone who is trained to be warm and empathic and kind, and the point of therapy is to get a relationship with someone who can provide emotional support, such that each session makes us feel like we have a friend and an advocate. It is certainly important for a therapist to be a kind person who can develop a good relationship with their client. But if this is how therapy works, how does it ever end? And another question about this theory is, isn't it desirable for each of us to eventually be able to find people whom we can have good relationships with, and feel supported by, other than a therapist?

Another idea is that the client and therapist are engaged in a very detailed quest to understand why things are like they are. If the client can just tell enough details and the therapist can ask enough questions, the therapist will be able to diagnose what is going on, and once that diagnosis is known, the cure will be applied. This is the traditional medical model, and it's natural to expect this in a health care system. It's especially applicable when the mental health professional prescribes or recommends medication.

A similar idea is that if the therapist and client together can figure out what happened in your life to produce problems in the present, and talk about those unfortunate events enough, that will make things better. Indeed, this sometimes helps, especially when lots of the problem has to do with bad memories that one tries to avoid but keep popping into mind. But sometimes people go over and over the unfortunate events that happened to them without finding that this makes life better.

Another idea is that the therapist is a source of wisdom about what to do in life: if you present to the therapist the tough decisions you are facing, the therapist will advise you about what's best to do. Indeed, a therapist who is expert at decision-making is preferable to one who is bad at it! But a great goal of therapy is that you get to be more expert at the skill of decision-making yourself. It's good to keep in mind that if a therapist does give advice, its quality depends, among other things, on the information about the situation that the client delivers. If, for example, the client takes the opportunity to air all their complaints about their spouse, but doesn't feel the need to talk about the spouse's positive qualities, the therapist may get a very biased picture of whether the relationship should be preserved or terminated.

Speaking of complaints: another strategy that therapy clients sometimes adopt is to talk about the bad things that other people do, that makes their life less happy. And a therapist might confirm that the client is in the right and the other person in the wrong, which might feel good for the client. But it is almost always more productive for the client to ask, "How can I best change my own strategies?" than to ask, "Why don't these other people act better?"

Sometimes people have the idea that if they can get their negative feelings "out," they will rid themselves of these feelings, and feel good. If they can express their anger, this theory goes, they won't feel so angry; if they can cry about the things they are sad about, they'll feel happier; if they can scream with frustration, they will feel calmer. This has been called the "catharsis hypothesis"; a catharsis is supposedly getting negative feelings out by a very emotional expression of them. A good bit of research concludes that this strategy doesn't work, especially with regard to "getting anger out." Pounding a pillow or a punching bag and imagining that it is the person who angered you tends, on the average, to make you more angry rather than less.

There is a kernel of truth in all the ideas mentioned so far. But here's a preferable way to think about how psychotherapy makes things better. First: mental health consists of a number of competences, or skills, that help us to be happier and to contribute to other people's happiness. Life is complex, so there are lots of these skills to get good at. But the major way that psychotherapy helps is by somehow helping people to get better at those skills that help their lives to be better.

What sorts of skills are we talking about? Work capacity, the ability concentrate long enough; the ability to feel good about the good things one does and the good things that happen; the skills of being kind to others; emotional regulation, especially the skill of handling various types of unwanted or adverse events; making good individual decisions; negotiating joint decisions or resolving conflict with other people (including assertiveness and conciliation skills); using respectful talk and being nonviolent; socializing and building friendships, getting along with others; using self-discipline; relaxing, calming ourselves; reducing unrealistic fears; having good habits regarding safety and health; and others. There are several versions of questionnaires that are meant to stimulate thought about how skilled you are in various areas, and how much you want to get better at any of these.

We can think of the process of improvement through skill-building in three stages. The first is insight, or goal-finding. What skills am I already good at, and which am I not so good at? Improvement in which of these would help my life the most? What's the connection between the problems I want solved, and the psychological skills that might help solve them?

The second stage is decision, or redecision: What are the skillful patterns that I want to get into my repertoire? What concrete examples of behaviors do I want to start doing more often? What do I want to do less often? What are the patterns, not only of visible behaviors, but of thought and feeling, that I want to do more frequently, and in which situations? What is the best way to handle a certain type of situation? Here's where it's good to be able to access the thought of wise people, not just the therapist. People have been writing about how best to think, feel, and behave in certain situations for centuries, and it's great if you can read and ponder these ideas. Psychological self-help books, but also writings on ethics and philosophy, including some religious writings, and ideas from poetry and fiction, can all contribute answers to the massive question, how do I go about living well? Caution: while there's much recorded wisdom, a certain fraction of what people have written is very misguided and just the opposite of what's best to do!

And the third stage, the one that is very often neglected, is that of rehearsal or practice. If you want to change habits of thinking, feeling, or behaving for the better, it's necessary to get lots of practice in the better patterns. Sometimes hundreds of rehearsals are necessary. Three ways of practicing come to mind. First is fantasy rehearsal: you imagine yourself doing the desirable thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in the situations where they are appropriate. Second is role-playing: you practice interpersonal dialogues, either with the therapist or someone else, or by playing both parts yourself. And third is real life practice: you try to do the good or "adaptive" patterns of thought, feeling,

or behavior in the situations that come up in real life. An important part of practicing is celebrating: saying to oneself, "Hooray, I did something good!"

To summarize, psychotherapy is most likely to be useful for people who answer these three questions: What do I want to get better at, and why? What specific thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, in which situations, constitute getting better at that skill for me? And how can I practice those adaptive patterns, and how can I motivate myself to do so?

This process is the same as the one we use in mastering other skills: sports, music, dance, math, chess, etc. For example, with math: 1) I want to get better at solving equations with one unknown; 2) here's how I do that: I do the same operation to both sides of the equation, in these ways, to get the unknown and nothing else on one side of the equation; 3) here I go, practicing finding the answer to a set of problems. With learning to play the guitar: 1) I'd like to get better at playing these three chords and switching between them; 2) here's where the fingers go, according to these diagrams; 3) here I go, practicing playing them, seeing if each string sounds, celebrating when the notes sound harmonious, celebrating as I get quicker at switching.

Back to the psychological skills arena, an example of these three stages is: 1) I have the insight that when I make even a slight mistake, I say things to myself that make myself feel really bad; I want to change my self-talk so that it's helpful to me; 2) instead of getting down on myself so hard, I want to focus on learning from the experience, mentally rehearsing a better way of handling the situation, and celebrating having done so; 3) here I go with a fantasy rehearsal of handling a mistake. We can use the same three stages on a more concrete level: 1) I made a social mistake in talking about myself too much in that conversation and not paying enough attention to the other person; in the future I want to be a better listener; 2) I want to use more reflections, facilitations, follow-up questions, and positive feedback, in a positive tone of voice; 3) now here I go imagining myself doing those four things in a conversation, celebrating when they make the conversation go well.

If you have a good and useful theory of how psychotherapy is supposed to help, it's much more likely to help. There are theories not even mentioned here, and I can't guarantee that the one described here will be best for you. But figuring out some reasonable explanation for why a certain plan of action should make your life better is almost always a good use of time.