

## How Can You Tell if Therapy is Working?

There are many different definitions and different ways to tell if therapy is working, including:

- **Symptom Relief:**  
Examples include feeling less depressed, less anxious, or less lonely.
- **Symptom Management Tools:**  
Going to therapy does not guarantee that you won't run into life challenges again. Instead, you will have gained a toolbox for handling life challenges. Usually, your counselor will assist you to identify your triggers, your emotions, or your tendency to resort to maladaptive coping mechanisms. Over the course of the treatment, your counselor will help you to develop hands-on strategies such as breathing techniques, distractions, or mindfulness skills, that you can utilize to effectively manage these challenges.
- **You Feel Grounded:**  
While symptom relief and management tools can be achieved in shorter-term therapy (counselors call this solution-focused treatment), a feeling of emotional balance and spiritual peace even in the face of life challenges can be best achieved in longer-term therapy. Therapy is a great place to explore a long-held belief system that is no longer working for you. For example, we may wish our verbally and emotionally abusive parents could change so that our life would be easier. As a result, we keep asking and fighting for the love we want our parents to provide. The reality is our parents have their own limitations. They are probably giving us what they can to their best abilities. When we can accept our parents as they are, we free ourselves from the trap of wanting something from our parents that they might not be able to provide. Feeling grounded means you embrace your feelings and honor your wants but do not become enslaved by your beliefs. What we think can impact how we feel (counselors call this cognitive-behavioral therapy).
- **You Gain Clarity:**  
Therapy can help you to see things and certain situations as they are. You will be able to identify your needs and speak up for yourself without feeling guilty or being aggressive. For instance, your boss resents you for resigning from the company and he lashes out at you and tells you that you are being inconsiderate and ungrateful with your decision. You might feel guilty by agreeing with him for the inconvenience you are causing. Or, you might feel disappointed that your boss is not supportive or understanding. Under this circumstance, it is very easy to react with anger back at your boss. However, as counseling provides a safe place for you to reflect and gain insight, you will come to realize that your boss probably responded with anger in the first place because of his own feeling of insecurity. Thus, you can choose not to join him by reacting similarly. You are not responsible for rectifying his behaviors or feelings. You are only responsible for your own feelings, thoughts, and actions. With this clarity on emotional boundary, you will be confident about your decision, honor your feelings, and not let your emotions get the better of you. How you feel can impact how you act and vice versa (counselors call this cognitive-behavioral therapy).

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- **Your Relationships Improve**

Along with the clarity on your emotional boundary, your relationship will improve. How? Imagine you represent your own garden, which has its own irrigation system. The other person is his or her own garden with its own irrigation system. Without a clear boundary, you might use your irrigation on the other garden. Over time, your garden becomes infertile due to a lack of water, while only the other garden blossoms. You will resent and regret not taking care of your own garden, but you do not know who to blame because you think you've been watering your own garden all this time. This is the danger of not knowing the boundary. When you know the boundary between the gardens, both irrigation systems will be utilized correctly. You will end up with two beautifully blossoming gardens. The gardens represent your relationship health and the irrigation systems represent your emotional resources. Hence, when you utilize your emotional resources with a clear understanding of emotional boundary, your relationship improves.

- **You Feel More Like You**

You will stop blaming yourself and judging yourself. You will learn to focus on your personal strength and have a more balanced view of yourself. You will know what works for you and what does not work for you, as well as *why* certain things work for you and do not. You will feel more comfortable in your skin. Therapy can help you to recognize that a low self-esteem is a product of what happened to you in the past, but it does not define you permanently. You will see your own resiliency by seeing how you handle your fear and past trauma. Remember we see the shiny stars in the dark sky.

- **A Corrective Emotional Experience with Your Counselor**

Sometimes you know therapy is working simply because you have developed a trusting relationship with your counselor, which might be something that has never happened before. Having a strong relationship with a counselor is one of the keys to a successful counseling experience. If you are looking forward to seeing your counselor, talking about your week, and processing your thoughts and feelings with this person that you trust, therapy is working. If your counselor is someone you feel comfortable saying things to without the fear of judgment or criticism, this signifies a corrective emotional experience. You will feel hopeful that a healthy relationship is possible and it just takes time and willingness to find the right fit and cultivate the relationship.

Many people think that feeling happy is a sign of successful therapy. The reality is happiness is merely a byproduct of successful therapy, but it should never be the goal. An extreme focus on happiness is just another way of trapping ourselves in our emotions. We are made of a full range of emotions. While an extreme focus on negative emotions will make it harder to gain clarity and insight, an extreme focus on positive emotions will also knock us out of balance because we will endlessly chase things to ensure we stay on the positive spectrum. The key is how do we find our resiliency—the ability to bounce back—when we are experiencing negative emotions; and how do we find freedom—the ability to unhook ourselves—so that we do not become enslaved by positive emotions. Counseling is most effective when it helps you to find a balance in life and inner peace.