

GETTING THE MOST OUT OF THERAPY

Lots of people find it difficult to talk freely about how they are feeling – even when you are talking to someone who is trained to listen, the process of revealing your thoughts and feelings can be daunting. But to get the most out of therapy it is important for you to be open with your therapist about the things that are worrying you. This article offers some strategies to get you started and to help you keep the momentum going to ensure you gain maximum benefit from your therapy.

Getting Started

For many people, the first step is to seek a referral from their treating General Practitioner. In Australia, a Medicare rebate is now available for up to 12 sessions per calendar year with a registered psychologist who has a Medicare Provider Number. To obtain the rebate you must be referred by an appropriate medical practitioner, ie., a GP, psychiatrist or pediatrician. The practitioner will ensure that you meet the eligibility requirements and develop a management plan for your condition. The cost and rebate from Medicare can vary depending on the consultation length and fee charged. If the psychologist bulk bills there will be no extra cost. For further information about the rebate, or to locate a psychologist in your area, contact the Australian Psychological Society: Tel 1800 333 497 or <http://www.psychology.org.au>.

The GP's Appointment

Arrive at your doctor's appointment prepared with some written notes about the symptoms you have been experiencing and how long you have noticed these symptoms. Your doctor will probably ask you some questions about your general physical health, recent events in your life that might have negatively impacted on your emotional well-being, and your family's psychiatric history. In this way he/she can develop a better appreciation of the current state of your mental health and determine the best approach to get you the support that you need.

Your General Practitioner will develop a Mental Health Plan or similar which you will need to take to your psychologist on your first visit. If you find it difficult to concentrate or feel overwhelmed by the prospect of approaching your doctor about this issue, it may be useful to take someone you trust along with you to take notes which can serve as a memory jogger for you later on.

If you are prescribed medication to help manage your symptoms, there are some other questions you might find useful to ask of your [medical practitioner](#) .

Your First Appointment

One of the important things you will discuss in your first appointment with a mental health professional (e.g., psychologist) is what you hope to achieve through therapy. You may have identified some goals with your doctor but you should spend some time thinking about your goals before your first therapy session. Remember, it is very likely you will have to repeat most of the information you went through with your General Practitioner to your Psychologist in your first appointment as he/she also requires a good

understanding of your background and symptoms in order to devise the most effective treatment approach with you.

Trust

It can take time to feel comfortable in the therapeutic relationship. Talking about your inner-most thoughts and feelings is not something most people are comfortable with at the best of times, let alone to someone they have only just met. To get the most out of therapy you do need to try to be as open and honest as possible. If you do not understand something, ask your therapist to explain – there are no silly questions in therapy! If you don't understand the therapist's answer, ask for clarification or a different explanation or example. Not understanding and not asking can lead to dissatisfaction with the process and resentment in therapy – not a situation conducive to improving your overall well-being!

Your psychologist should:

1. Take your complaint seriously
2. Be open to change technique or approach to something that will work for you
3. Show willingness to admit the therapist's contribution to any dissatisfaction
4. Help you understand your part in the dissatisfying exchange.

The Therapeutic Process

Initially you may feel a sense of relief at having confronted the issue that brought you to therapy. You may feel elated at the prospect of reaching a resolution of worries or solution to a problem that has been bothering you for a while. At the same time, you may have a sense of uncertainty or even some confusion about the therapeutic process and where it is all leading. Speak to your therapist at any time should you have concerns or doubts about what is happening during your sessions.

As therapy progresses, and you move closer to the heart of your concern, the intensity of your emotions will probably increase, making it difficult for you to participate in the therapeutic process. This may happen at several stages during therapy. It is uncomfortable to acknowledge difficult truths about yourself. Sometimes the very nature of your disorder can work against you and make it difficult for you to remain committed to your own well-being. But to achieve your goals you will need to do your best to stick with therapy, including following the recommendations and strategies (such as homework) agreed to during your sessions. Talk to your psychologist about ways to overcome obstacles you encounter as you work towards your therapeutic goals.

Standard Sessions

Usually appointments with a psychologist are around 50 - 60 minutes duration, although in some situations a therapist may offer longer sessions. Any longer and the emotional intensity that often accompanies therapy can make it difficult for both you and the therapist to maintain concentration.

It is important that you keep to your scheduled appointments as well. Weekly or fortnightly appointments are most common because it gives you time to process the

information from last session without losing track of where you are up to for the next session. Sometimes, your Psychologist will recommend some ‘homework’ for you to complete in between sessions. This could be something like reading a recommended article or book, or writing in a journal. Remember, you are with your therapist for about 60 minutes – that leaves many more hours outside of therapy sessions in which you could be working on achieving your goals. Doing your best to complete all agreed tasks before the next therapy session will help to ensure you get the most out of the time and money you are investing into enhancing your well-being.

Cancellation Policy

Your therapist’s time is important to both of you and most therapists will have a cancellation policy which you will be asked to agree to as part of entering the therapeutic relationship. If, for some reason you need to cancel or postpone the appointment, please give your psychologist the notice required in accordance with their cancellation policy, otherwise you may be charged the cost for the session. There is usually someone else waiting to see the therapist who could utilise any appointments that you are unable to keep.

A Note On Confidentiality

As part of providing a psychological service to you, your therapist will need to collect and record personal information from you that is relevant to your current situation. This information will be a necessary part of the psychological assessment and treatment that is conducted. You may view and/or have a copy of the material recorded in your file upon request, subject to the exceptions in National Privacy Principle 6.

All personal information gathered by the psychologist during the provision of the psychological service will remain confidential and secure except when:

1. It is subpoenaed by a court, or
2. Failure to disclose the information would place you or another person at risk; or
3. Your prior approval has been obtained to
 - provide a written report to another professional or agency. e.g. a GP or a lawyer; or
 - discuss the material with another person. e.g. a parent or employer.

Conclusion

Your decision to invest in your well-being is momentous. It takes courage to admit that you need support and to access that assistance as required. The potential gains to be made in therapy are huge. Different therapists work differently and if you find one approach does not suit you, there is likely to be an alternative that will be more effective in helping you achieve your goals. The key to getting the most out of therapy is to maintain an open and honest relationship with our therapist. Therapy can be viewed as a collaborative effort which you and your therapist make to assist you to enhance your overall well-being.