

Clinical Corner – What is Psychotherapy Anyway? (by Dr. Matt)

Recently I was speaking to a group of concerned parents regarding their children. A topic I frequently discuss is self-esteem and ways parents can enhance this in themselves and their children. After the presentation, when most people had left, one woman asked me the question "What is psychotherapy anyway?" At first, the importance of this inquiry escaped me, but as we spoke I was again confronted with the lesson that people in our society know very little about the practice of psychology and how it can be helpful. What's more, what is known is usually obtained through watching television or movies, neither of which portray psychotherapy as it is.

Let me explain psychotherapy by dispelling some myths which have been created by watching such shows as 'One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest', 'Sybil' and so forth.

Myth 1: People Who Enter Psychotherapy Are Crazy.

In fact, they are more stable than most. I make it a point to share with my clients that I never really get to work with people who have the biggest problems because they are the ones who lack the courage and insight to face a problem and remedy it. On the contrary, every person I see has already shown they have both the insight to realize that something is going wrong for them and the courage to say "I want to change this".

Myth 2: Therapy Is Very Painful.

Therapy does not have to be painful unless you feel that learning about yourself and living a more fulfilling life is painful. Learning about one's self can be very gratifying, uplifting, and enjoyable. This goes doubly for families who learn not only about themselves but about each other as well. I know that when I learn, the lessons that stick most are the ones I had fun learning. Play therapy works well with children, but having fun and learning are inextricably tied throughout life. Granted, there are times when dealing with traumatic, emotional issues can be painful but understanding them, and coming to grips with them, can be extremely exciting. Families who go through this process feel the exhilaration of truly enjoying each other and developing closer and stronger ties with one another.

Myth 3: The Therapist Tells You What To Do And Things Get Better.

Who knows you better than you – no one, including your therapist. The hallmark of positive psychotherapy is not working "on" people but working "with" them. Therapists learn to work with their clients. The client, after all, is the one who will know if things are getting better in his or her life. In this way therapy is like a smorgasbord. Sure, the therapist cooks many of the plates, but the client only samples them before choosing which ones he or she wants. Hopefully, whatever he or she chooses will help the situation. If it does not, feel free to sample some other ideas.

Myth 4: If I Go To A Psychologist, It Means I Can't Solve My Own Problems.

Two points are important here. First, every person is faced with some difficulties which seem insurmountable. To be able to see that one needs help at these times is a sign of emotional strength not weakness (We all know someone who has been dealing with the same problem for years but does nothing about it – Would you call that strength?). Second, psychologists do not solve problems; give clients the answers, and leave. Psychologists help people develop coping strategies so they not only solve the present problem but also can deal with other problems in the future. If a problem were a boulder, it is your choice to stand under it and be crushed, or climb to the top of it and reach new heights.

Myth 5: You Have To Have A Major Problem Before Consulting A Psychologist.

One of the most interesting questions I ask people when they first come in to see me is how long they have been experiencing the present problem. Whether it is a family or an individual problem, the answer usually ranges from 3-7 years. What this tells me is that most people are sensitive enough to pick up the cues of a problem early on. However, we are trained to hope that they will remedy themselves. Waiting this long often make a small problem into a big problem. The field of psychological problems is one where the adage "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure" is very true. If you feel something is not right, seek a consultation. If everything is fine, you will have

piece of mind knowing it. If there is a problem, you will have the solace of knowing you can solve it much more easily now rather than five years from now.

These are just a few of the myths which block people from obtaining therapy for themselves. My advice to people contemplating psychotherapy is – feel free to shop around and find a therapist with which you and your family feel comfortable. You will be telling this person some sensitive things and you want that bond of trust. You can then get started on changing things for the better.