

Seeing A Mental Health Therapist

You know you need some help. You are really suffering. Intense painful feelings won't go away. You feel awful and don't know how change it. You know you are acting in a way that makes you feel worse and bothers other people. But you don't know how to change how you act or how to feel better. Talking to a therapist may be what you want. You may really need to see someone to help you work out things.

Or you might feel just the opposite—that a therapist is the *last* person you want to see, but the adults in your life “make” you go. Their intentions are good—they know that working with a therapist can help kids feel better, work out tough issues and learn ways to handle problems. They think you can may be able to get some help in therapy.

Lots of kids are embarrassed about seeing a therapist. Some don't want anyone to know. Others think it's boring. Some are uncomfortable sitting in a therapist's office. Or some may want help and feel the therapist doesn't understand at all.

Therapy isn't always comfortable. Therapy is a process to help you know yourself and learn how to handle your problems in ways that work. It requires hard work, honesty and facing difficult emotions like fear, anger and sadness. Working out problems in therapy isn't easy and takes time.

It's hard to know what to expect when you first see a therapist and how to get the most out of therapy. Here are some myths about therapy and some truths that may help you get a good perspective working with a therapist.

Myth #1

Seeing a therapist means I am crazy. Teens—and others—see therapists to help them work

through difficult times, feel less sad or just plain vent. It's a safe place to focus on yourself and learn to deal with problems. It doesn't mean you're crazy. It means that you are facing some tough stuff in your life, just like most kids in foster care have faced.



Artwork by Greta Anderson, Wisconsin

Myth #2

Being in therapy is a sign of weakness. It takes courage to change things about yourself and to work through personal issues that may be making you miserable.

Facing yourself and changing what you don't like isn't easy. If you've been in the system, you may have faced some difficult times, some things that no child or youth should have to face. This take a lot of strength.

Myth #3

You can fix yourself alone. Sometimes a therapist will see you alone. But often he or she will have your foster parents or other family members included in part of your sessions. In most situations,

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you will still have private confidential conversations with your therapist, but your foster or adoptive parents will be called in sometimes too.

We don't live alone, and your family need to know how they can help you and make the changes *they* need to make. Those who are living with you need to understand you, support you and learn how to best care for you, whether you are 1 month or 18 years. As the song says, "we get by with a little help from our friends."

Myth #4

The counselor magically

changes you. A counselor is there to help you look at what is hard in your life and help you work on goals that *you* want to work on. He or she can help you make some changes that will help you become happier and make your life easier. Meeting with the counselor or therapist isn't magic, but it's a chance to get a glimpse of yourself and what you can do to make your life better. It's hard work—not the counselor—that makes your life better. Remember that. *You* make the changes.

Myth #5

Therapists are all the same. You want to go to a therapist more than one time before you decide that whether you can relate to that person or not. If you can't relate, discuss it with the therapist—a good one will want to discuss it. Tell your worker or your foster parent that you just don't relate. You might have to try a few before you find one the right one.

Sometimes when hard emotions are coming out in therapy, you might want to quit. Think hard

before you give up on therapy. When it's hard to deal with the stuff you are talking about in therapy, it might be that time when you are working out a lot of bad stuff inside. You might find yourself feeling a whole lot better and find you are dealing with your life much better after a rough patch in therapy. Hang in there.

In her office, I could just cry and tell her how scared I really was. Everyone deserves a place like that."

Greta Anderson, a former youth in care, says, "I didn't understand why therapy was so important until after I met my 5th therapist. She listened, offered support, but most important of all, she became personally

invested in my well-being and I trusted her."

Greta goes on to say, "I knew that even when I moved around and had to be tough, in her office once every two weeks, I could just cry and tell her how scared I really was. Everyone deserves a place like that."

Greta is currently in college and hopes to go to grad school to become an art therapist.

Myth #6

The rest of the world doesn't have any problems.

This is *not* true. Until the world is better educated about mental health, this myth will continue. Bodies get sick: people get colds, flu and some get terrible diseases like diabetes or cancer. But there are very few people who don't never have an illness.

It's just the same with the mind. When you look around at school and others seem to have happy perfect lives, it's just not so. Most people suffer different mental illnesses during their lifetimes.

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Most studies indicate that 8 out of 10 people will have at least one episode of *major* mental illness during their lifetime. Some experts think the number is higher than that.

Some mental illnesses are like dealing with colds and others are like dealing with HIV or diabetes. The brain works because of biological and chemical processes, just like the body. Some people suffer from depression, anorexia, or have a bipolar disorder.

Maybe you are anxious or depressed. It's hard to get through, but some people get over it even without any help. For a long lasting or more difficult mental illnesses, you need help to get better.

Know that there *is* help out there. Our minds get illness just like our bodies do. Our bodies sometimes need physicians and our minds sometimes need a therapist.

No matter how easy other people's lives may seem, everyone. For some, mental health problems will not be a major obstacle. Even then, therapy may really help, along with hard work and persistence to get through bad times. If you are faced with chronic or reoccurring problems, it will take hard work, courage, and the support of therapists to deal with life. Therapy is one of the best ways to work through the really tough times in life.



Resources

Analyze This: Teens Write About Therapy

<http://www.youthcomm.org>

A comprehensive guide to mental health resources for teens

Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center

<http://www.cincinnatichildrens.org/svc/alpha/p/psychiatry/teens/resources-teens.htm>

Topics about teen mental health

Teens Health

http://kidshealth.org/teen/your_mind

Medlineplus

<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/teenmentalhealth.html>

Movies that show good relationships with therapists:

Good Will Hunting

Matt Damon stars as Will Hunting, a closet math genius who only avoids prison by agreeing to see psychiatrists, all of whom he mocks until he meets his match one, played by Robin Williams. As mutual respect develops, the healing process begins.

Antwone Fischer

Antwone Fisher tells the dramatic story of a troubled

sailor (Derek Luke) who is ordered to see a naval psychiatrist (Denzel Washington) about his temper. Little does he know that his first step into the doctor's office will lead him on a remarkable emotional journey to confront his painful past—and and connect with the family he never knew.

Ordinary People (1980)

Mary Tyler Moore and Donald Sutherland play a seemingly happy couple and Timothy Hutton plays a son who blames himself for his brother's death. Only when the son begins to see a psychiatrist (Judd Hirsch) does the broken family starts to understand their complicated emotions.

The Prince of Tides (1992)

Nick Nolte is Tom Wingo, a disillusioned coach who must reveal his tortured childhood in order to help his suicidal sister. Barbara Streisand is Susan Lowenstein, the determined psychiatrist who battles Tom's resentment in search of the truth.

Movies that depict specific diagnoses:

- **A Beautiful Mind** (schizophrenia)
- **As Good As It Gets** (obsessive-compulsive disorder)
- **The Hours** (depression)