



NEW JERSEY
PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

So, You Feel Pretty Bad and You are Considering Seeking Therapy, but...

By Marianne Herzog, PhD

Potential Barriers to Seeking Help

Making the decision to contact a psychologist can seem like a daunting prospect, particularly if you have never been in psychotherapy before. Below is a list of common feelings that can become barriers to making that call:

-Asking for help is a weakness or failure

You may feel vulnerable about admitting that you need help, and stupid letting someone know that you don't have all the answers. Actually, it takes wisdom and is a sign of courage to feel this way, and to then go ahead and seek help with things that are concerning you. In seeking help, you can gain the benefits that psychotherapy can offer—feeling better, functioning more effectively at work and in your relationships, and experiencing a more fulfilling life. It may also be a surprise to you that talking with your therapist about your reservations regarding therapy can add to what you get out of your work together!

-I'm not "mentally ill"

The stigma associated with needing help with conditions that concern "mental" versus "physical" health is unfortunate as it stops many people from seeking the possibility to cope more effectively with life's challenges. Increasingly, there is scientific support for the idea that it doesn't make sense to separate physical and psychological health. The mind body connection is actually more intertwined than previously thought. I invite you to consider the perspective that psychotherapy can help you to develop a plan for living in a way that supports emotional wellness. Just as you would not hesitate to seek the help of a physician to assist you in developing a plan to maintain your [physical] wellness (e.g. for high blood pressure or chronic sinus infections), you should not hesitate working with a psychologist in getting know yourself. Specifically, what things are contributing to your not feeling well, as well as what actions you can take to feel better emotionally, enjoy relationships, and engage in behaviors that bring you pleasure. Talking about this concern in therapy may lead to new understandings and more acceptance of yourself, both of which are part of the healing process.

-I don't see how therapy will work to make me feel better

A sense of hopelessness can be one of many of the emotional concerns that people bring to therapy. Depression often includes a certain way of thinking that creates a pessimistic attitude. Anxiety can make you fear that there is no one that can help you feel better. When you are overwhelmed by a number of problems, worries, and

difficult emotions, it is hard to imagine that anyone could possibly understand what you are going through, much less help you to sort things out and develop solutions. In actuality, there is much scientific evidence that psychotherapy is effective in treating a variety of mental health concerns. Talking about your progress and needed changes in treatment is an ongoing part of any effective psychotherapy.

-My family and/or culture doesn't believe in or endorse psychotherapy

Psychotherapy is not for everyone. Though it is supported by science to help with many mental and emotional conditions, some people, because of familial or cultural beliefs, pursue other means of help that they also find useful, including spiritual or pastoral counseling, coaching, or other forms of assistance. If you are ambivalent about pursuing psychotherapy, consider talking to someone within your family or culture who you trust to have your best interests in mind about your situation and options for getting help. This person may be able to provide the counseling you need or help you find an appropriate psychologist, as well as to support you in talking with your family about your desire to seek help. If these are not available options, your physician, a friend, or someone at work may be of help. Most importantly, a psychologist you choose should make culture a part of the conversation in a way that feels comfortable to you from the very start. Talking about these issues openly in therapy, though sometimes difficult, needs to be an ongoing part of effective psychotherapy. Share any concerns you have with your therapist, including if you feel there are cultural misunderstandings or assumptions on his/her part that are resulting in inappropriate recommendations for treatment. Assess for yourself how open and willing the therapist is to hearing your concerns. Trust your feelings and, if necessary, find a different therapist.

-I can't afford it

This is a real concern for many. Access to effective and affordable mental health care can be limited by availability of providers and by financial constraints. Medical insurance is now required to include mental health treatment. However, it sometimes means that there is an out of pocket copayment that may be a financial burden. It is also important to be sure you are taking your mental health needs seriously and realizing that you may have to adjust your spending priorities temporarily while you are involved in treatment. When this is truly not possible, talk with your physician about alternatives for obtaining affordable treatment. There are community mental health centers and agencies that provide mental health services that operate on a “sliding scale,” so that you pay according to your financial situation or that offer services free to the public. Increasingly, medical offices are becoming places of “integrated care” that provide both medical and psychological treatment that is covered by your health plan.

-I'm not going to share my private thoughts and feelings with a “stranger”

This is a very common concern! These are the “tools of the trade” for psychologists; their training, experience, and ability to empathize prepare them well for hearing many and varied life stories and experiences. Therapists listen with respect and concern as well as a desire to help people find relief from the pain they bring to therapy. There are times when you and the therapist are just not a good match in some way, and that you do not feel comfortable sharing your thoughts and feelings with this person. It doesn't necessarily mean that the therapist is not competent and it certainly is not that you are not a “good patient,” there simply is something in the relationship that makes it difficult for you to feel heard and understood. In those cases, discussing it with the therapist can result in a resolution that can lead to continued and very productive work together, or to a recognition that a referral to someone else is necessary. Trust your feelings when something doesn't feel right and also be sure to seek a different psychologist—don't “throw out the baby with the bath water” and abandon

the idea of therapy altogether! When you find someone with whom you can work, talking about previous discomforts of disclosing personal issues becomes part of the therapy. Hopefully, this information eases your worries and paves the way to effective therapy.

Remember, it is not only acceptable, but a good idea to talk about all of these issues with your therapist—it actually can lead to a more effective and helpful therapeutic experience!

Marianne Herzog, PhD, is a licensed psychologist in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. She provides mental health consultation with the children, families, and staff members of Early Head Start and Head Start programs in Philadelphia and Camden that includes writing informational articles and presenting workshops on a variety of psychologically-related topics. Dr. Herzog provides psychotherapy in private practice in Lafayette Hill, PA. She draws on a variety of psychological perspectives in addressing such issues as anxiety, depression, parenting, life transitions, stress management, and relationship difficulties. She finds mind-body approaches to therapy particularly valuable, and includes mindfulness-based strategies in helping people discover their own unique strengths and paths to healing. Dr. Herzog is a member of the American Psychological Association (Health and Psychotherapy Divisions) and both the Pennsylvania and New Jersey Psychological Associations. She is a member of both the Pennsylvania and New Jersey Psychological Association's e-Newsletter Committees, and a contributor to their publications.