

THErapy EXPECTATIONS

By Carolyn Bushong

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People go into therapy for different reasons. Often a life crisis, such as a divorce or loss of a job, triggers the decision. Sometimes a client wants to overcome anxiety or depression. People also reach out for help with addictions to alcohol and/or drugs or eating disorders. Others just want help dealing with normal living issues, such as sexual incompatibilities or confusion about men's and women's roles – or some just want help with personal growth and happiness issues.

Therapy no longer carries the stigma it used to, although some people would still prefer to call it “coaching.” But many people still don't know what to expect from therapy. Often spouse or boyfriend will say, “Okay, I'll go to therapy!” not really knowing what that means. Therapy is sometimes seen as the *answer* itself, rather than the means to solving the problem. Expectations of therapy are often unrealistic, i.e. therapy only works if the therapist knows what he or she is doing AND the client is open to change.

What You Can Expect From Therapy:

- That you should be able to reveal your deepest, darkest secrets without judgment from the therapist.
- To learn better communication skills
- That you can express your full range of emotions, including fears, in a safe place
- Support and understanding of your pain
- Skill to help you exert greater control over your life, whether it is in your relationships or at work
- Confrontation on your own personal issues

Responsibilities of the Therapy Client:

- To choose a therapist that is right for you
- To let your therapist know when you are not getting what you want
- To monitor your own progress
- To watch out for dependency on the therapist
- To trust your gut more than your therapist's authority and let him or her know when something doesn't feel right
- To take a break from or terminate therapy whenever you want to
- To set goals with your therapist
- To report any therapist who crosses a line with you sexually or otherwise

Kathy Chose a Therapist Just Like Her "Boyfriends"

Kathy was frustrated. She'd been in therapy for years and couldn't understand why she wasn't getting any better. In fact, at times she was sure her problem - her relationships with men - was getting worse.

She'd been through two marriages and a string of dead-end dating experiences with men who refused to make a commitment to her.

"I can't get my therapist to listen to me," she said to her women's support group, which she joined to supplement her therapy. "He says I'm too demanding and my expectations are too high. He makes me feel that there's something wrong with me. He doesn't understand that the harder I try, the worse my situation seems to get."

The women's group pointed out to her that her problems with her therapist were the same problems she cited repeatedly in describing her relationships with other men in her life - *they don't listen, they don't understand, I keep trying.....* For the first time, Kathy questioned whether she had been getting good therapy.

She didn't realize that her relationship with her therapist had become just as dysfunctional as all her other relationships. And just like in her relationships with men, she kept trying to prove something to him instead of moving on.

Transference:

Most people who go into therapy do not understand "*transference*." It is the process whereby a client transfers his or her feelings, needs, and/or behaviors onto the therapist. Kathy had gone into her therapist's office looking for *his* approval more than help and direction. Then she behaved with him like she does with other men, handing him complete control, never questioning anything he said to her, and continuing to try to please him and make him *understand*. She played out her problem with men *with her therapist*.

It's not always negative, however. A male client of mine once told me he had never met a woman who understood him as well as I did, and that because of this, he was falling in love with me. I explained *transference* and that it sometimes happens, but let him know that this was a business relationship and not "real" in that sense. I told him that expecting to be "accepted" by women was something I was teaching him, and my goal for him was that he would find other women who would understand him as well.

Countertransference:

Therapists are people too and often have their own issues. *Countertransference* is when a therapist transfers his or her own feeling, needs, and/or behaviors onto the client. In Kathy's case, her therapist may have had a need to dominate a woman, he may be a man who dominates his wife OR someone whose wife dominates him, leaving him with a

need to feel strong and important in his therapy sessions. This may be conscious or he may be oblivious that he is even acting this way. Therapists often have their own "authority" issues (like doctors) and may play too strong a role in a client's life, fostering dependency from clients. Other therapists may not take enough authority and try too hard to become the client's friend (needing to be needed), always consoling, rather than teaching the person how to gain better control of their life.

Getting good therapy probably isn't any easier than getting good medical treatment and it may take more than one try to find the right person. But by choosing a therapist carefully, asking your friends who has helped them, asking the right questions, and most of all, following your innermost gut feelings, ***you can find the right therapist and change your life.***