

From Dallas Morning News:

Therapy just equals time plus distance, right?

Adapted from a recent online discussion

Dear Carolyn: Sometimes I get frustrated by what seems the default solution to everything: therapy. (Not just you, but our society in general.) This morning I realized that “therapy” is really just code for: changes take time and a different perspective. I suppose sort of like in Alcoholics Anonymous, where your “higher power” doesn’t necessarily have to be God; or losing weight, little changes over time, two steps forward, one step back, carry on. Anyway, thought I’d share.

Therapy Default

Answer: I think yours is a common impression, but I’d be surprised if anything close to a majority of people sought therapy for their problems. Yet, many people spin their wheels for years on the “different perspective” element of change. Needlessly.

And where are they going to get a brisk shove out of the mud if they reject the idea of therapy out of hand? A sharp friend often works, if you have one and are receptive to sharp messages. Al-Anon is a good resource, but not everyone knows that it’s broadly applicable.

Some people are able to get out of their muck without any outside assistance, but others aren’t.

As a rule, I suggest therapy when I see spinning wheels, and skip suggesting it where I see self-motivated progress (though the latter are more likely to seek help: discuss).

Still, good therapists can even help those who help themselves, by serving the basic purpose of listening uninterrupted to a situation (as a client presents it). They can also cut through the distracting clutter of insignificant things people obsess over nonetheless, and see things they might not have pieced together themselves. In the end, it’s more like a strategy meeting than a Jack Handey sketch.

Carolyn: Much to ponder.

The idea of “listening uninterrupted” is appealing. Is this kind of listening only possible in therapy? I’m thinking because of the financial compensation, the listener is sort of automatically rewarded, and there’s less emotional responsibility or interaction compared to, say, a friend or sister.

Therapy Default again

Answer: It’s not just financial compensation, it’s a reward just to do a job well — i.e., to help someone.

The other element of uninterrupted listening is that the therapist is theoretically not invested in any outcome besides the client’s good health, where a friend or sister might want you to break up with someone, move somewhere, mend fences with someone, etc., for her own reasons, even if it’s not in your best interests.

Dear Carolyn: I am of the spinning-wheels category. I keep thinking therapy is what I need but am terrified of taking that step. I hate, hate, hate talking about myself and my feelings. The very idea makes my skin crawl. Did I mention my dislike of talking about feelings? How do I do this?

Therapy for Me?

Answer: First, I think you need to connect your deep aversion to opening up with that wheel-spinning sensation.

Next, try writing down your feelings, journal-style. Think of it as warming up.

Then, make an appointment to say, “I hate, hate, hate talking about myself and my feelings. The very idea makes my skin crawl.” This will be nothing new to a veteran therapist, and it will provide instant framework for your conversation from there. Good luck.