

# What Good Can It (Psychotherapy) Do?

by May Benatar, Ph.D., LCSW

The question above is one that I encounter frequently in one form or another from friends, potential clients, close relatives. It takes various forms:

1. What can they tell me that I haven't already thought of myself?
2. Life will take its course no matter who I talk to. My partner will die and I will be alone.
3. I'm going to die anyhow.
4. Talking won't bring her/him back.
5. I'll still have cancer/multiple sclerosis/end-stage heart disease.
6. There really is no way out of my marital/familial/work dilemma.
7. My depression is a result of a chemical imbalance.

I'm frequently not quick enough on my feet to respond thoughtfully, so I'd like to take a moment to do so now.

Therapy, at least the kind that I know about, is not chiefly about finding solutions -- i.e., problem solving. Intelligent people are generally quite aware of a range of solutions to their problems. They just can't act on them. They are frozen.

They think that no potential solutions are really applicable to their situation or relevant or available to them. Or they feel, and perhaps this is the most frequent, that in their particular case there are no real solutions. It's almost reflexive for the listener, the relative, the loved one, the good friend, the clergy person, even some therapists to offer some thoughts as to possible solutions. Inevitably they fail. It's not about that.

Within most adult folks there is an inner wisdom that would offer great assistance in resolving the impasses of our life. Therapy is about accessing our inner, innate wisdom, not replacing it with someone else's. I can think of many instances where I felt that there were no solutions. I was trapped. In retrospect I knew the solutions and just found them totally unpalatable. I could not end that destructive friendship, it was just too important to me. I could not resolve a domestic or an economic problem, I just wasn't strong enough.

## **So what are the elements of psychotherapy that enable that inner compass?**

1. The magic of relationship: When researchers have tried to isolate the "active" ingredient in successful psychotherapies, across many theoretical approaches (CBT, psychoanalysis, mind/body approaches) they frequently come up with the same answer: "it's the relationship, stupid," the connection between therapist and patient is the key remedial.

Neuroscientists have a more exact way of stating this. It's about "limbic (a key brain structure) resonance." [1] Simply stated, therapy is not so much about the rational, linear, thinking mind. It's more like music. In the best situation the therapist hears the particular "melodic essence" of the individual, playing softly in the background and is able to tune in and hum along, maybe even in harmony. Just this tuning in is deeply healing. How many people in your life have actually heard your "melodic essence?"

2. A therapist listens differently than other people: I heard a story once of a psychotherapist describing his occupation as one of listening -- "I listen for a living."

A therapist's training and experience sharpen and educate their musical ear. It has been called "listening with the third ear," among other things. [2] When things go well, a good therapist hears what others do not, even the speaker.

A therapist may hear anger where others only hear hopelessness, fear where others hear anger, shame where others hear belligerence. Truly thrilling for both the patient and the therapist is the moment when a door opens and the narrator gets a slightly different perspective, a different way of hearing their own feelings/problems. "Maybe its not my inadequacy, maybe I am feeling truly alone in this intimate relationship." "Perhaps my adversary doesn't hate me, perhaps they are deeply ashamed of their failures in life and feel humiliated." And most powerfully, "maybe there is meaning embedded in my confusion and in my unremitting pain." Meaning can set one free.

Certainly there is much more to be said on this subject. But I will pause here and invite readers, both those who have experienced therapy and those contemplating dipping a toe in, to share their thoughts.

References:

[1] Lewis, T., Amini. F., Lannon, R. A General Theory of Love New York: Vintage Books, 2000. p. 169

[2] Reik, Theodore. Listening with the Third Ear. New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1948.