

CHAPTER 3

Perspectives on Psychotherapy

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WHAT IS PSYCHOTHERAPY?

Taking an active role in your own care is part of living fully. This is not only for your physical well-being but also for your emotional health. For example, by reading this book and doing the exercises in it, you are taking an active role in your care. You are trying to learn how to better manage the challenges that your multiple sclerosis (MS) presents.

Sometimes, however, people with MS find it helpful to seek professional help for aid in coping with the many challenges that MS brings.

Professional psychotherapy can be defined in this way: It is a relationship in which one person obtains professional assistance from another for the purpose of bringing about some change in the feelings, thoughts, attitudes, and behavior of the person seeking help. Sometimes, a person will go into therapy knowing changes are needed but doesn't know how to go about making them. The therapist's job is to help that person figure this out, develop options, and aid in making a plan for change.

Types of Therapists

If you live in an urban area, you will have a number of options when seeking a therapist. In rural areas, however, there are fewer practicing professionals. If you live in a rural area, you may want to commute to see a therapist who has a specific type of training or therapeutic orientation. If this entails considerable traveling, you may want to consider an initial meeting or two and then opt for counseling over the telephone. In the last two decades this type of counseling has become increasingly popular.

Examples of individuals trained to provide different kinds of psychotherapy follow below:

Psychologists

A psychologist has a doctoral degree, typically, a Ph.D. or Psy.D., in psychology from an accredited university. This may mean the person has studied at a university for seven or eight years, or even more. In many states, to legally call oneself a “psychologist,” one must have a license to practice psychology, which involves passing an examination, a review of credentials, and, often, oral examinations and interviews. Rehabilitation psychologists specialize in an area of psychology that also has trained them in the implications of having a disability such as MS. These psychologists tend to be members of Division 22, Rehabilitation Psychology, the American Psychological Association.

Registered or Certified Counselor, Marriage, Family, and Child (MFC) Counselors

Typically, these counselors have earned either a master’s or, in some states, a bachelor’s degree in a counseling field or psychology. Because state laws covering counselors vary considerably from state to state, there is no standard description of the kind of training, examination, or credential review (if any) required by the state in order to practice. Professionals may be registered or certified as counselors or as a marriage, family, and child (MFC) counselor with a family systems orientation. Check your state’s licensing department regarding counselors if you have any questions.

Clinical Social Workers

Clinical social workers have a master’s degree in social work (MSW) and a state license as a clinical social worker. Some of these individuals work at hospitals or outpatient clinics and have a part-time practice in psychotherapy while others are employed with full-time practices.

Psychiatrists

Psychiatrists are medical doctors who after finishing medical school did a four-year psychiatric residency in a hospital. They may or may not have a psychotherapy emphasis in their work but they can prescribe medications for anxiety, depression, and other mood disorders which can be helpful, often as a complement to therapy.

Pastoral Counselors

Some members of the clergy like ministers, priests, rabbis, and so forth have had training as pastoral counselors. They may have a strong religious orientation but some of them make very good therapists indeed. Frequently, they don’t charge for their services or they may have a sliding-scale fee in a private practice, depending on the client’s ability to pay.

TYPES OF THERAPY

There are many different types and styles of therapy. Which type you use will depend on your preferences and the training and orientation of your therapist. *Orientation* refers to the underlying theory that the therapist subscribes to, which affects the therapist's style, focus, and techniques.

Some of the most common types of therapy are described below. This listing is obviously not meant to be comprehensive; it is intended to give you an overview of the major schools of thought among practitioners of psychotherapy today.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) emphasizes learning and how “faulty learning” can cause problems in your life. It focuses on your current situation as more important than your past, and its main purpose is to demonstrate to you how your habitual thinking patterns affect your present emotions and behavior.

The theoretical basis of CBT is that many problems stem from irrational and dysfunctional thoughts, ideas, and beliefs, and that these all strongly affect feelings and behaviors. The goal is to modify your dysfunctional thinking so that positive changes in your emotions and behaviors can take place. CBT often involves homework and practicing new behaviors as integral parts of the therapy. The emphasis is on improving your coping skills and abilities.

Psychodynamic/Psychoanalytic Therapy (Insight-Oriented Therapy)

This therapeutic approach is based on the idea that much dysfunctional behavior stems from unconscious impulses and conflicts that developed and were repressed during early childhood. This form of therapy helps clients to bring repressed feelings into conscious awareness. The goal is to work with these new insights over time, with the final goal to modify behavior. Dream interpretation is often a component in this therapy. Due to the emphasis on unconscious impulses and conflicts, the therapy may be intensive, and require more than one therapy session a week.

Humanistic Existential Therapy

The emphasis in humanistic existential therapy is placed on the client's built-in abilities to achieve self-fulfillment. There is a focus on self-awareness and self-acceptance, but the emphasis is more on the present than the past, and on the options and decisions we all must make in our lives.

THERAPY FORMATS

There are a number of different formats in which therapy can be provided. The format you choose can relate to both your therapy needs and your ability to pay for it. Individual psychotherapy sessions are the most common, but based on the problems you have been encountering, other formats may be as helpful as individual sessions. As a person with MS, you may start therapy on your own to deal with issues relating to anxiety, depression, loss of self-esteem, anger, and so forth. It then may be helpful to bring your significant

others or family members into some sessions to deal with emerging issues, such as the challenges your caregivers face, the changes in your life expectations, or the issues related to your changing abilities to love and support your family members, or your spouse.

Because of your continuing need for support, and the high cost of therapy, you may find that group therapy (led by a skilled therapist) or MS self-help groups (ideally led by a skilled facilitator—who is often a person with MS) will work best for you.

Checklist 4: When Should You Seek Therapy?

You may seek therapy for a number of reasons. It is a well-known fact that emotional and physical health are interconnected and frequently interdependent. Please check (✓) any of the reasons listed below for seeking therapy that apply to you.

You may consider therapy if you:

- Feel hopeless or worthless most of the time.
- Feel overwhelmed by your situation and are unsure of what to do about it.
- Your emotions, such as stress, sadness, anxiety, or anger, make it hard for you to do what you want to do from day to day.
- You are doing things that may harm your health, such as neglecting to take your medications, drinking too much alcohol, abusing drugs, or staying in bed all the time.
- Your emotions or actions are harming your relationships with others.
- You can't make any progress at work, school, or in other important areas of your life.
- Individuals you trust, such as a physician or family member, have advised you to seek help.
- You want to learn more about yourself and how to grow as a person who also happens to have MS.
- Other

Checking only one reason above can be a valid reason for seeking psychotherapy, but if you've checked several, your need to begin a course of therapy should be apparent to you.

Living with a chronic disease like MS can be life-changing. For some, their identities as people can start to be all about the disease. If you see your primary identity as someone with MS, you may wish to consider therapy to help you learn how to live as someone who happens to have MS.

HOW TO FIND A THERAPIST

Depending on where you live, your preferences, and your resources, finding a therapist can be a challenging process. It is a highly personal decision, too, because a therapist who works well with a friend of yours may not be a good choice for you. For people with MS, however, there are several resources that can help to focus your search. Before you start looking we recommend that you first consider the following issues.

What to Consider Before You Start Looking for a Psychotherapist

The following list is not meant to be exhaustive, but it should give you a framework for choosing a psychotherapist who can work well with your issues.

WORKSHEET 6: CONSIDERATIONS FOR CHOOSING A PSYCHOTHERAPIST

What type of counseling approach would I like my therapist to use? _____

Do I want my therapist to have a certain educational or training background? _____

Is it important to me that my therapist has experience with MS or at least with physical disabilities? _____

Are there things about the therapist's office or location that are important to me? _____

How can I pay for this therapy? Will my health insurance or HMO plan cover it? _____

Where to Look

Armed with the information that you've clarified on worksheet 6, you now need to find your psychotherapist. The resource points below will help you in your search.

Your healthcare provider. Ask your primary care physician and other health care providers for referrals to therapists who are familiar with MS. If you are seen by an MS specialist such as a *neurologist* (a physician who specializes in the nervous system) or a *physiatrist* (a physician who specializes in physical medicine), he or she is likely to know a therapist who can treat you. Be sure to ask your physician what he or she knows about the therapists they recommend and why they recommend them!

MS community resources. In most large urban areas, there are several community resources that can help you find a therapist. For example, the National Multiple Sclerosis Society can suggest mental health professionals who understand MS. To access this help, contact your local chapter or call 800-FIGHT-MS (800-344-4867). The Multiple Sclerosis Association of America also has a toll-free help line (800-532-7667) that may offer you ideas or strategies for finding a therapist familiar with MS. Both of these organizations can also help you find support groups, telephone networks, and so forth in your area.

Other people with MS. When you have MS, one of the best ways to find a therapist is to ask others with MS. If, currently, you don't know any others with MS, attend a support group or an informational workshop on MS, where you are likely to meet others with MS who have also sought therapy. (Call your local hospital for suggestions about informational workshops.) If you find someone who highly recommends a particular therapist, ask him or her the reasons for the recommendation.

Your friends and family. Ask close friends and family members for their recommendations. You may be surprised to find out how many people you know who have been in therapy. Again, if you find someone who highly recommends a particular therapist, ask him or her the reasons.

Local, county, or state mental health departments/agencies. Although they do not specialize in treating persons with MS, your local or state mental health agencies are another potentially excellent resource for finding a therapist. Look in your local phone book for the names of community mental health agencies. Call them for recommendations for a psychotherapist, or to find out if you are eligible for therapy at their organization, or for the names of organizations that do provide such services. If you have a low income and don't have health insurance coverage for therapy, a community mental health center may be an important option for you to explore; they often provide services based on financial need.

Professional organizations. Many professional organizations have referral services that provide information and names of licensed mental health providers. Some of these providers may offer "pro bono" (free) or sliding-scale fees. For example, to find a licensed psychologist, you can contact the American Psychological Association at 800-964-2000, and then a 411 information-operator will use your zipcode to locate and connect you with your area's referral resource.

If you have cognitive problems (e.g., issues with thinking quickly, memory concerns, and so forth) tell the referral resource about your concerns. In some cases, neuropsychologists who conduct therapy may be good choices because they can better understand your issues in the therapy session, can help to clarify these concerns (see chapter 10), and might be able to help you with useful recommendations.

Your church, synagogue, or religious institution. Ask at your church or synagogue whether they provide therapy services, specifically, whether the cleric is trained in psychotherapy or as a pastoral counselor. Some religious institutions have part-time psychotherapists and provide free or sliding-scale fee schedules. Some religious groups support psychotherapy treatment groups that serve specific areas.

Universities. You may be able to obtain low-cost therapy from a university or school that trains therapists. Some university psychology, counseling, or social work departments have counseling centers where graduate students-in-training provide therapy to those in need of it at no or low cost while supervised by faculty members. If you choose this option, be sure to ask about the training experience of the therapist as well as the amount and type of supervision he or she receives from an experienced provider/faculty member and that person's background.

Questions to ask. Hopefully, after investigating your options, you will wind up with the names of several therapists. When you have a list of options, ask the prospective therapist for the opportunity, either by phone or in person, to ask several questions. Interviewing your potential therapists will help you to make an informed decision about who may best work collaboratively with you. A list of questions to ask a potential therapist appears in the worksheet below.

WORKSHEET 7: CONSIDERATIONS FOR INTERVIEWING A THERAPIST

Questions to Ask Prospective Therapists

Availability

What is your current availability for taking on new clients? _____

Financial

What are your fees? _____

Do you accept my insurance? (Be prepared to inform the therapist about your specific plan.) _____

How does your billing procedure work? _____

Do you have a sliding-scale fee? (If this is important to you.) _____

What is your policy on charging for cancellations or missed appointments? _____

Education and Licensure

What degree do you have? _____

From where is your degree? _____

How long have you been practicing? _____

Are you licensed? _____

Logistical

Is your office wheelchair accessible? (If needed.) _____

Do you use air-conditioning in the summer? (If relevant to heat tolerance.) _____

How close to your office is parking? _____

How long are typical appointments? _____

Could we teleconference some sessions? (If appropriate, e.g., distance.) _____

Experience

What is your expertise? _____

What is your theoretical orientation? _____

How many people who have MS have you seen? _____

How well did you work with people who have MS? _____

Can you give me some examples of clients you've had (no names) with hidden or neurological disabilities?
(Ask this only if the therapist has not treated a client with MS.) _____

Knowledge About and Attitudes Toward Those with MS

What is your understanding of MS? _____

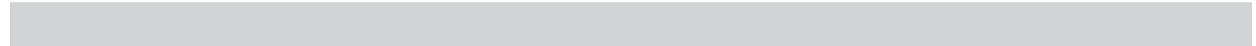
What is your understanding of how MS affects a person's emotions? _____

What do you think are the unique challenges for people with MS? _____

Have you ever personally had a friend or acquaintance with MS? _____

How well did you know that person? _____

Here are my specific questions: (Add your own questions here.)



If a prospective therapist refuses to answer any of your questions, either by phone or during your first appointment, seriously consider looking for someone else. You will do best with a therapist with whom you feel comfortable and with whom you have an honest, trusting, collaborative relationship. It is,

however, important to be respectful of the therapist's time and to be polite as you go through your list of questions. A good psychotherapist can be quite busy.

MAKING YOUR CHOICE

Once you've interviewed several prospective therapists and examined your options in terms of finances and convenience, it is time to make your choice. Your choice may be clear; you may have decided that you want to work with one person whom you've interviewed. If you haven't made your choice yet, list the key factors for your choice of psychotherapists from the answers you've generated for worksheet 7:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

Based on the above, my top therapist choice(s) are:

_____ , _____ , _____ .

Now you need to assess the therapist's availability, and make that appointment.

WHAT TO EXPECT FROM THERAPY

In the initial interview (or consultation), the therapist should disclose to you the relevant information about his or her training, background, experience, and approach to services. Fees and payment arrangements should be clearly stated. Much of this information is usually available on the disclosure sheet you are commonly given at the first appointment. Often, the first session is a consultation. The initial emphases are for the therapist to talk with you to figure out your difficulties, strengths, and goals, and to discuss how you might work together to meet your goals. The first session is a time to decide whether you will feel comfortable with this therapist. Will this therapist and therapeutic approach be helpful to you? The therapist must decide, too, whether he or she can work with you. If not, you should be told why and help should be provided in finding a therapist who may work better with you.

Early sessions are often spent talking about what led you to seek therapy. Sometimes referred to as an "assessment," the therapist will ask you specific questions about your concerns. You may be asked personal questions about your life experiences and family background/experiences.

Sometimes assessment may include having you complete questionnaires or tests. Ask questions if you have any about the purpose of testing. You can also ask for the results to be reviewed with you. (Take notes or tape-record if that seems helpful.) After assessment, set goals; therapy should then focus on helping you gain insight into your problems and how to make changes. The goals of therapy and the definition of a successful outcome should be clear to you.

Sometimes, therapy may involve the therapist listening to you and helping you to clarify your emotions. Other times, it may involve practicing techniques both inside and outside of therapy. For example, relaxation methods and reading assignments can all take place outside of the therapy sessions. Therapists vary on how directive they are. Some will be very directive, others will let you take the lead. Make sure you feel reasonably comfortable with the approach that is used.

Typically, therapy lasts forty-five to sixty minutes a session and may occur on a weekly basis or on a more or less frequent basis. As you progress, you may decide to see your therapist less frequently. It is a good idea to ask your therapist about the length and frequency of therapy that you might expect based on your assessment data and goals. Successful therapy is a collaboration, a two-way process that works best when patients and therapists have an open, collaborative relationship.

After you meet your goals, you may decide further therapy is no longer needed. Some therapists will ask you to return in a few weeks or months for a check-up visit to see how you are doing and to make sure you are maintaining your gains. It is up to you to decide to set this appointment, but it is often a good idea.

You may experience a wide range of emotions when in therapy. You may feel nervous or have difficulty in discussing difficult things. Some days it may be uncomfortable or even “intimidating” to attend your scheduled session because of the emotional material with which you are dealing. Such emotions are normal and can, in fact, be a positive step in your progression. It is best to discuss these concerns with your therapist and to “stay the course.”

In sum, the therapeutic relationship must be based on a balance of trust, mutual respect, and openness in dialogue. It can be very helpful to feel empathy from your therapist and to work with one who will respond to your needs/questions within the context of his or her acknowledged limitations. After several weeks of sessions, if you haven’t started to experience any benefit, it may be helpful to seek a new therapist after discussing your perceived need for change with the one whom you’ve been seeing.

WHAT SHOULD NOT HAPPEN IN THERAPY

Your relationship with your therapist should be based on mutual trust and respect. Licensed therapists are expected to adhere to a code of ethics and to the state laws pertaining to the practice of their profession. Some things that should not happen include the following:

- Violation of your privacy/confidentiality (including your records/test data)
- Infringement on your legal or civil rights
- Sexual harassment, inappropriate touching, and/or other relations
- Physical or verbal abuse
- Any form of exploitation

If you think your therapist is acting unethically, you should speak to him or her about your concerns, if you feel safe in doing so. If your therapist does not answer your concerns, you should consider changing to another. You can report the therapist’s behavior to the relevant local health professionals’ association or state licensing department.

WORKING WITH YOUR THERAPIST: KEY POINTS

Set goals. Be clear with your therapist and yourself about your expectations. Try not to let each other stray from your established objectives. Obviously, this will happen on occasion, but it should not become a common practice.

Be an active, not a passive, participant. Be prepared, rested, and punctual for sessions. Do your homework assignments. The more you put into therapy, the more you will get from it. Before your sessions, give some thought ahead of time to what you want to discuss. If you get to your appointment a few minutes early, you will have time to do this.

Collaborate/Educate on MS. Share with your therapist new information and relevant books on MS. Reference the National Multiple Sclerosis Society's Web site (www.nationalmssociety.org) and discuss the physical, sensory, and cognitive issues that can affect your emotions. This is critical because many good psychotherapists may lack current information on the impact MS can have on an individual's life, and specifically how it is affecting you.

Keep your appointments. Missing therapy appointments is not helpful, as you will best progress if you attend all scheduled sessions. You may also want to move up an appointment if you are leaving town or otherwise discuss how you might make up missed sessions with your therapist.

Dreading your appointments. If you notice yourself dreading attending therapy sessions, or missing appointments regularly, think about what your reasons may be. It could be more than simple situational inconveniences, illness, and so forth. It may be a sign that you are avoiding dealing with issues or that, for some reason, you are frustrated with your therapist. These issues need to be brought up and discussed. It is important to remember that some of this short-term emotional pain is part of the process to a long-term adjustment to MS that you must undergo.

Review your progress. Share your concerns with your therapist as they come up. You may need to adjust your goals. After a few sessions, you should feel that the therapeutic experience is collaborative and that you feel comfortable with your therapist. A certain amount of time should be spent reviewing your progress with the therapist.

If you find yourself thinking about stopping therapy, discuss the matter with your therapist first. If you think you have met your goals, tell the therapist. If you feel stuck, discuss that with the therapist.

DOES THERAPY WORK?

Yes. It does! Most of what we know about the effectiveness of therapy comes from studies done on those with only emotional concerns or on those with other health problems, such as cancer. This research suggests that therapy can be effective in helping individuals with chronic illnesses feel better in many ways. It can reduce depression, anxiety, and stress. Therapy has also been shown to improve health (Ehde and Bombardier 2005).

The few studies looking at the effectiveness of therapy among persons with MS suggest that therapy is also beneficial to persons with MS (Ehde and Bombardier 2005). We also believe that it can help MS-related symptoms such as pain and fatigue.

Conclusion

We hope that this chapter has provided you with a comfortable framework for finding a therapist if you feel the need. Therapy support can be very helpful, not only in dealing with crisis, but in charting new directions and in making your adjustment to living with MS. There are a number of options and fee structures (including sliding scale and pro bono work). Try not to sit on the sidelines in emotional pain. Take advantage of some of the great resources that are out there. Our very best wishes to you in this process.