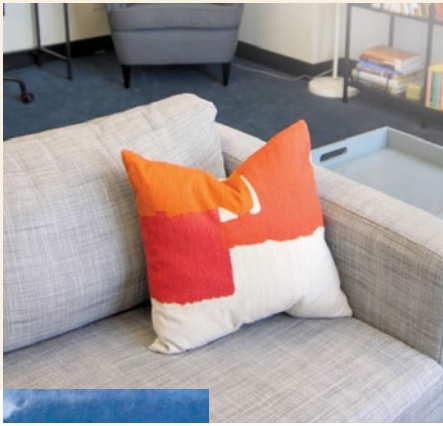




# Demystifying Psychotherapy

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A Helpful Guide



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## A Helpful Guide

**If you are reading this, you are contemplating beginning therapy, already have experience as a psychotherapy client, or are simply curious to know more about this fascinating field. Whatever your objective, we hope you will find value and meaning in what we have to share about psychotherapy and how it can support building a life worth living — yours.**

### So, what exactly *is* psychotherapy?

Psychotherapy is a relational, collaborative, and dynamic process that unfolds between a therapist and client. The process is as unique to the clients who seek it, but the universal purpose remains the same: to manifest the client's individual definition of a well-lived life. Psychotherapy is bound by the rules of professional conduct and ethical obligations on the part of the therapist. It entails practices and interventions which are informed by the therapist's chosen form of psychotherapy and their evolving understanding of the client's history, goals, and needs. The client is an active participant who enters into this endeavor willingly.

Ask ten therapists to define psychotherapy and you will hear a number of commonalities in their responses, but you will also notice differences. The latter stem from the fact that there are multiple pathways to health and healing and a great diversity of psychotherapy traditions and modalities. There are many routes psychotherapists might take to guide their clients towards the nearly universal set of goals that bring clients to this process in the first place.

What are those goals?

**People pursue psychotherapy because they want to lead connected, meaningful, and happy lives.**

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Goals may include increasing your understanding of yourself, accepting difficult parts of your past or present experience, learning how to alleviate your emotional distress, and making concrete changes that reflect your desires and aspirations. Importantly, the therapist is not the one doing all that—you are. It is, after all, your journey, and you are the first and foremost expert on your life. The therapist brings their professional knowledge, experience and presence to help you examine yourself, acquire new tools and insights, and motivate and guide you when you feel lost or stuck.

This brings us to the central aspect of psychotherapy that mental health professionals tend to agree on, irrespective of their chosen theoretical orientation: the importance of a solid relationship between the therapist and the client. Stepping outside of your comfort zone to make meaningful changes in your life is risky emotional business. It will make you feel uneasy, raw and vulnerable at times. Having a therapist who makes you feel comfortable and accepted, and who is genuinely committed to you and the effort you are making, is critical. Decades of research confirm that a strong alliance between the therapist and the client is one of the most important, if not the most important factor, in positive psychotherapy outcomes. This is why psychotherapy is not just a set of cookie-cutter techniques and insights, but a dynamic, authentic and caring collaboration between the professional and the client that is brought to life and animated by the client's hopes and goals.

So why try it? Because it is a highly effective means of improving your mental health and overall wellbeing; because it is likely to make you a better human being—and thus a better partner, son or daughter, friend, and parent; because the pain you are in right now may be too much and something needs to change; because it fosters accountability and will help you not just make but also sustain positive changes in your life; because having a therapist in your life whose main mission is to help you achieve your personal goals and who believes in you can feel really wonderful. Find your own “because” and see for yourself if it is worth it.

### Digging deeper: The essence of psychotherapy

The therapeutic relationship is the true essence of psychotherapy, a key ingredient to change and growth. This unique relationship between the therapist and the client is what breathes life into psychotherapy.

To be witnessed and seen, welcomed, respected, and supported by another whose sole purpose is to apply themselves to render caring assistance is a powerful catalyst for personal transformation and recovery.

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The quality of the client-psychotherapist bond has been shown to be the key predictor of the outcomes of psychotherapy. After all, psychotherapy entails an intimate exploration of the client's subjective, interpersonal, spiritual, and embodied experience, their past and present, their hopes and dreams. This work requires a great deal of trust and vulnerability.

Clients may bring to psychotherapy their wounds, traumas, insecurities, and shame. As relational beings who need to feel loved just as desperately as we need air to breathe, humans often find that the source of pain that has wreaked the greatest havoc on their lives is relational in nature: being neglected or abused, misunderstood or bullied, abandoned, broken up with, assaulted, made to feel "less than," lonely—the list goes on.

Without trust, regard, and genuine connection, therapy interventions derived from the very best and most solidly-researched protocols will have limited impact. Every client is different and therefore every relationship built over time between the therapist and the client will also be unique. It will continually evolve and shape the work the therapist and the client are doing together. When people reflect back on successful psychotherapy experiences, they tend to emphasize the depth of the bond and caring they experienced with their therapist over recollections of specific skills and insights they gained, even if the latter helped them very much.

**We hurt in relationships and we ultimately heal in them, too.**

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### Next steps: You've decided to try psychotherapy!

This is a huge step that is worthy of celebration. After making this decision, you might find yourself wondering, "Ok, now what?" The first step after deciding to embark on the psychotherapy journey is to identify some potential therapists who might be a good fit for you. There are endless options and finding the best fit can be overwhelming.

#### Here is a quick list to reference when selecting a therapist:

- Reflect on the qualities and characteristics of a therapist that are important to you such as:
  - Theoretical orientation/style of therapy
  - Areas of specialty
  - Spiritual beliefs
  - Age
  - Race
  - Gender
- Ask trusted sources for referrals (friends, family, doctors) or carefully search the Internet
- Visit the therapist's website to learn more about them and their process
- Use your intuition and trust your gut!
- Know that you can always change therapists if you don't immediately find a good fit

Once you've identified one or two people, now is the time to make your first contact.

#### Initial contact

The initial contact via Internet or phone might feel overwhelming, but rest assured that the experience is oftentimes much less anxiety-provoking than you might initially think. The first contact is not the first psychotherapy session. Think of it as an introduction to the therapist and the process of psychotherapy. In this first contact you will likely answer a few questions about what is bringing you to therapy, figure out scheduling options, discuss insurance coverage and paperwork components, and get answers to any questions you might have.

While administrative details like new client paperwork and insurance are most likely not anyone's favorite thing to focus on, they are very important components. Similarly to medical doctors, psychotherapists are bound by rules and regulation in regards to HIPAA, informed consent for treatment, client rights, etc. It is very important that you read through, understand, and sign off on these items prior to meeting with your therapist for the first session.

It may be helpful to take some time prior to your first appointment to reflect on what you would like to focus on in therapy. While your therapist will guide you through the experience of the initial session, creating some space for

reflection can help you make the most use of the time. If you were previously in therapy, reflect on what was and wasn't helpful in those experiences. Sharing this feedback will help your new therapist really tailor psychotherapy to your needs.

### The first session

During the initial session, you will be able to share what brings you in, discuss any current and recent symptoms you may be experiencing, set goals, and ask questions. This first session may feel a bit overwhelming. You may be talking about things you have not shared before or thought about in a while. Disclosing these things to your therapist may bring up feelings of discomfort.

Know that this is all a part of the process. Your therapist is in it with you! Share any concerns or apprehensions you might have with them. Know that this is just the first step. You will continue to meet with your therapist weekly to delve further into what brings you into therapy, develop new coping skills, and identify valued goals to work toward together.

This first session can also be a time to assess goodness of fit with your therapist. While meeting anyone for the first time can be uncomfortable, trust your intuition, and give yourself and your therapist the opportunity to explore what might be bringing you in. Dive in. Try to not minimize or avoid discussing your most important reasons for deciding to engage in psychotherapy. Your therapist can only truly assist you in your journey if they know what brings you in and what you would like to work on.

Importantly, know that you can always ask questions if anything is confusing or troubling you! You and your therapist will spend time setting treatment goals, and your therapist will share thoughts and recommendations that they might have for your time together. If you have any feelings of hesitancy or reticence around these goals or recommendations, make sure to share them with your therapist.

### The second session

During your second session, you might find yourself continuing to talk about treatment goals and recommendations, diving into what brought you into therapy, and starting to develop new insights and a larger coping skill toolbox. Most importantly, know that the therapy space is for you—you get to set the agenda! Also, keep in mind that the more you are able to reflect and utilize the skills learned in therapy in your life between sessions, the more you will get out of the psychotherapy process.

If you ever find yourself feeling frustrated with your progress, discuss these concerns with your therapist so that together you may figure out the most effective path forward. It may feel uncomfortable to directly address any concerns or worries that you may have—keep in mind though that this is exactly what the therapy space is for! We are here to help guide you on your journey.

## Getting the most out of psychotherapy

**Psychotherapy is an investment in yourself and your future. It is not a quick fix or a one-size-fits-all approach. Psychotherapy takes time, commitment, energy, effort, and willingness to take the leap into the discomfort of the unknown.**

At every step along the way, if you find yourself with questions or queries, we highly encourage you to ask your therapist, voice preferences, and share any concerns. Sometimes people wonder or worry if their therapist likes them or what their therapist might be thinking about them.

Therapists at Wildflower embrace the psychotherapy journey with empathy, non-judgment, and positive regard for their fellow travelers.

Here are some concrete ideas about how to get the most out of your psychotherapy experience.

### Have an open mind.

We find that clients who are open and willing to create and maintain an open mind about the psychotherapy process are able to explore their inner thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in order to work through barriers and move towards their valued goals.

### Expect discomfort and awkwardness.

Sometimes people may expect that they will be able to instantly share their deepest and darkest fears and worries and that they will seamlessly form a relationship with their therapist. Know that most often it takes time—time to get to know each other (just like any other relationship!), time to adjust to the general process of psychotherapy, time to get to know yourself. Be patient with yourself. It may be helpful to come up with a mantra or grounding statement to remind yourself to have patience with yourself and with the process.

### Be honest.

Many times people may worry, “What if I share \_\_\_\_\_ with my therapist, and they think something negative about me!” This is a completely understandable worry, AND please know your therapist truly wants to know how you are genuinely doing. Psychotherapy is not the space to downplay or dismiss your own feelings and thoughts. Psychotherapy is the space to challenge yourself to be vulnerable and to open yourself up to someone else. This can be very hard! Deep breaths. We are in this together.

### Examine your expectations.

Remember that therapy is hard work. It can feel worse before it starts feeling better. At the end of every initial session, we make sure to remind people that therapy is challenging work. Oftentimes in the initial psychotherapy session, people find themselves discussing topics or memories they have not thought of or have ignored for years. This can bring up complicated emotions. Know that is okay. We have to go through the “muck” to get out on the other side. If you notice feeling more anxiety, more sadness, or more overwhelm, that can be part of the process. Please remember to share your experiences and reactions with your therapist so that you two may work through this together.

### Keep a psychotherapy journal.

It can be incredibly helpful to reflect on your psychotherapy journey in order to make the most use of the process. Whatever journal medium you choose, we highly encourage clients to have a way to integrate reflection and personal growth into their day-to-day routines.

### Check your compatibility with your therapist.

While keeping in mind that therapy is a process and that it takes time to develop rapport with a new therapist, you may find that you don't vibe with the therapist. That is ok! Goodness of fit and feeling comfortable with your therapist is perhaps the most important quality of a psychotherapy relationship. If you feel unsure about the fit, you have many options. You can talk about this with your therapist. Your therapist will not be offended! Your therapist will explore these feelings with you and help you identify the most effective plan moving forward. If you do not wish to talk with your therapist about your concerns, you can reach out to Wildflower's intake team to discuss your concerns, and they can help you get set up with someone else who might be a better fit.

Overall, there are various ways to get the most out of your psychotherapy experience. One of the most important takeaways is that the process is all about you! Your therapist will help be your guide along the way.

### What happens if my therapy hits a rough patch?

The client-therapist relationship ideally offers a sense of safety, allows for vulnerability, and creates space for exploration. Your relationship with your therapist is unique and evolving because, just as in all relationships, human beings bring both tangible and intangible qualities to every interaction.

Some people's chemistry meshes better than others. Sometimes you find someone who just “gets” you. When you've found a therapist who really feels like the right fit, it might be scary the first time you feel annoyed at them or—gasp!—even angry.

Such an experience in psychotherapy is referred to as a “rupture,” meaning a breach in a previously harmonious relationship. As uncomfortable as conflict might be, it is important to know just how normal this is. Even though you might feel like running for the door (or ending the Zoom call), you can work through it together. In fact, working through a rupture has the potential to make your relationship with your therapist even stronger and to give you the skills to do this important repair work in your relationships with friends and family.

What might cause a rupture in the client-therapist relationship? Therapeutic ruptures often occur when your therapist said something, or did not say something, in a session. Other ruptures occur when boundaries are enforced that seem unfair or unclear. Policies, rules and regulations all guide the clinical profession. As in all settings, rules do not always feel fair in every situation. When your therapist enforces a policy that is intended to maintain fair practices but does not feel like it should apply to you, or feels like an obstacle to seeking psychotherapy, it makes perfect sense that you might feel angry or confused.

For example, some therapists choose not to respond to communication between sessions, while others have a practice in which skills-coaching in times of crisis is part of their work. If you email your therapist in a time of need and do not hear back for over 48 hours, it could feel terrible if you do not know the off-hours communication policies.

Ideally, therapists let clients know ahead of time where they stand on this and other issues. In reality, therapists sometimes make mistakes; they might have forgotten to respond, not had adequate time, or were not clear enough when they reviewed the guidelines. Even if the guidelines were communicated clearly and in a timely manner, it is possible that their policies can feel harsh. When they are first set, boundaries can feel like rejection or abandonment.

When boundaries are set consistently, compassionately and clearly, we begin to see that they are just the opposite. Healthy boundaries help us know what is and is not acceptable in a relationship. That way, we can show up and be fully present without worrying if an unspoken line is being crossed.

Additionally, a scheduling error may force a therapist to cancel your session with little notice or to show up late. If you see the therapist at your favorite store, you may worry you live in the same neighborhood, which could feel awkward. Or you might have gotten the feeling that the therapist was not getting what you were saying. Instead of correcting them, you let it slide and now feel lonely and misunderstood.

If a rupture occurs, you might find yourself having the urge to avoid talking about it altogether. As in any relationship, conflict is difficult. It is natural to avoid discomfort and hope that it just gets better—or to find another therapist. Finding a therapist who is a better fit for you is always an option you can explore. However, this is unlikely to solve the problem in the long run. All relationships experience rupture and all relationships that endure do so thanks to effective repair. Even though you might not want to hurt your therapist's feelings or are afraid of coming across as "mean," therapy is just the place to practice difficult conversations. Your therapist can be there to help navigate this rocky terrain.

The good news is that repair is possible. When repairing a rupture, it can be helpful to stick to some basic tenets of healthy communication: use "I statements," speak in descriptive, non-judgmental language, and clearly state your needs. For example, "When you came to session late, I felt like our time together didn't matter and I was undervalued. In the future, it's important to me that you email me if you know you are running late and do your best to start our sessions on time. I can commit to doing the same for you." The hopeful part about repair work is that it will get easier over time. The powerful part about it is that it will make your relationships stronger.

### The end of therapy: How does it work?

When you first meet with a therapist, you naturally want to know how long it will take to accomplish your goals. The somewhat frustrating answer is that it depends on many factors—your goals, the nature and complexity of the issues bringing you to therapy—to name a few. Under the best of circumstances, psychotherapy ends when your goals have been met. This may take three months, three years, or more than a decade. As long as you are actively working on issues of importance to you and getting something meaningful from the experience, this is a sign that psychotherapy remains productive and is worth continuing.

The question of how many sessions a person may need to address a given issue is impossible to answer accurately due to the fact that a brand new psychotherapy needs to be created for every client. Every human being is unique and brings to the psychotherapy endeavor their own particular history, traits, goals, needs, values, dreams, struggles, and strengths.

**What we can say with authority is that if the client contributes a robust sense of motivation to do the work while also experiencing a good interpersonal fit with their therapist, positive outcomes are bound to follow.**

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Mental health can be viewed through an illness lens or a wellness lens. Both are valid. Applying the former lens, psychotherapy is initiated because there is an ailment—a set of symptoms—that inhibits the ability to live a good life, however the sufferer may define it. Thus, the client finds themselves in the therapist's office because they want the pain of depression, social anxiety, panic, etc. to be alleviated. Once symptoms are no longer present, the treatment ends. But does it?

Here is where the wellness lens contributes a different approach to mental health. Mental health is not something you get to achieve, check off your list, and cease giving attention to. Just like it would not make sense to stop going to the gym because you went several times and now feel physically healthy, it is not realistic to proclaim that one has mastered coping with adversity, suffering, conflict, trauma, and all the other incredibly rich, complex, and difficult experiences that come with being human. Psychotherapy becomes a powerful space for ensuring that wellness and mental health are receiving the attention they need.

It is because of the never-finished nature of mental health that many people choose to be in longer-term psychotherapy. Also, some clients need months or years to address the suffering that has brought them to psychotherapy in the first place. The duration is ultimately determined by the client's goals and needs. These may evolve over time.

Ending psychotherapy is not predicated on having no difficulties whatsoever. It has more to do with whether you feel you have accomplished what you wanted to and are fairly confident that you now have the tools and insights to guide you when new stressors arise. Many people share that one of the ways they knew they were ready to part ways with their therapist was because they internalized their therapist's voice and could imagine in difficult situations what their therapist would say and recommend. Others feel not only that they gained a sense of confidence about their ability to handle various stressful circumstances but have also developed a more robust social support network to lean on during those times.

Ideally, the process of ending psychotherapy—what therapists call the termination phase of psychotherapy—is a planned and collaborative endeavor. If you are starting to wonder whether it is time to wind down your therapy and your therapist is not bringing this up, talk to them about it. Discuss your thoughts and feelings and review your goals. Together you will be able to set the agenda for the remaining time together, establish how many more sessions might be needed to accomplish the remaining goals, and review and solidify your psychotherapy gains.

In the last chapter of your work with your therapist, there are many things to accomplish. First and foremost, it is important to revisit your goals and discuss how they have been met. You might discover that new goals have emerged in their place and continue your work to attend to them. If goals have been met, this is a time to prepare for termination. Together with your therapist, you will reflect on all that you have learned and also continue to focus on generalizing your skills and insights to your life outside of the session. This may be a time to begin to space sessions out, perhaps meeting with your therapist every other week versus weekly. If new struggles emerge at this point, this will also be an opportunity to work through them.

A key takeaway is that psychotherapy rarely is a one-and-done experience. It is not uncommon for therapists to see their clients at different points in the client's life. A client who was first seen as a young adult might come back in their thirties after starting a family, terminate after a year of therapy, and resurface again a decade later. It is also okay if

you choose to work with a new therapist rather than return to your old one—whatever feels right to you.

Humans are wired to avoid pain. This can translate into avoiding saying a “real” goodbye to your therapist. Sometimes clients choose to gradually disappear, never showing up to that one last session in which goodbyes are said. Therapists themselves may be guilty of colluding in this avoidance. It is very important to have an ending—a good goodbye—that honors all that was accomplished and the developed connection between the therapist and the client. Try to resist the urge to sneak out of the relationship with your therapist without saying goodbye.

Sometimes, it may not be possible to end psychotherapy in an “ideal” way; sometimes you have to make a unilateral decision to end the process. Psychotherapists are bound to “do no harm,” much like physicians. If your therapist fails to abide by the legal and ethical standards of their profession, you need to sever ties to protect yourself. Depending on the nature of their transgression, you might consider reporting the issue to the therapist's supervisor/employer and, in the event of a grave violation, to their licensing board.

When considering ending psychotherapy, carefully review your reasons. If you are finding that the therapist is not helping you in the way you expected, consider whether you have made your goals and preferences clear. The therapist may be trying very hard to help you while being unaware of what works and does not work for you. Perhaps you would like them to give you more feedback or homework assignments. Or it annoys you that they are focusing so much on your past. Or even worse, they keep saying things that either don't make sense to you or that you disagree with. Before you decide to stop, talk to your therapist about how you are feeling. It is very possible that this will be just what is needed to re-energize your work together.

Endings can be bittersweet. Ending psychotherapy is no different. Making room for both the joy of meeting your goals and the loss of the relationship that you and the therapist have come to cherish provides for a healthy closure.

We hope that your experience of psychotherapy—whether you are exploring your options, just beginning the process, are in the thick of it, or are returning after some time away—is one that adds value and long-lasting change to your life.



**If you are looking to start psychotherapy at Wildflower, please reach out to our intake team by calling 312.809.0298 or completing the inquiry form on our website.**