

Ask a psychotherapist

Question: I read self-help books all the time but lately, when I talk to my friends about my problems, they say I should see a therapist. I've always had trouble with the idea of going to therapy because I don't get how talking to a stranger once a week for an hour can help me. Can you tell me what I would get out of it that I can't just get from reading?

Answer: It seems natural in a society like ours that overvalues individualism, to seek answers on our own; the huge self-help industry attests to this. But research shows that human beings are profoundly social creatures; we need the closeness and support of others in order to thrive. Most of us need the focussed attention and support of another human being to make significant changes and to heal from past hurts.

Family and friends may provide much of that support while expecting the same back from you. Your friends, by urging you to go to therapy, may be suggesting that they no longer feel able to help you. They may be feeling overwhelmed or even frustrated by their inability to help you resolve long-standing problems.

Unlike friends who rightly expect equal time from you to discuss their own dilemmas, a good therapist is totally focussed on you. More importantly, unlike a friend, a skilled therapist comes with years of training and experience in resolving psychological and social problems. You may feel that some issues are too personal or painful to share with friends; whatever you tell a therapist remains confidential. A compassionate therapist listens without judgment to your difficulties and focusses with you on finding solutions.

While a therapist begins as a stranger, a therapeutic relationship quickly develops. Research has shown that the quality of this relationship, regardless of techniques used, is the best predictor of successful therapy outcome. In the uniqueness of this relationship, lies the best potential for healing.

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