



Where the sidewalk ends: The work of psychotherapy between sessions

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Evansville Courier and Press
November 7, 2011

A psychotherapist can only mark, in the poet Shel Silverstein's words, the "chalk-white arrows" toward health for the patient. Most of the work of therapy happens outside the office.

You might say this is a matter of simple math — if a patient spends one hour per week with me, he is left with 167 hours in the week, or 111 waking hours to follow through on whatever changes he is attempting to make. Even more important, how he spends his time outside my office; moment to moment and day to day, will either continue to reinforce old patterns of thinking and behaving or help to incorporate new ways of being in the world.

So, how does a person go about changing his moment-to-moment thoughts and day-to-day behaviors?

The answer varies widely depending on the patient and his circumstance's. The interventions then should be tailor-made to fit each patient.

A good start is to look for times when the patient already is thinking or doing what is helpful. For example a person who is struggling with frequent worry benefits from more closely examining the times when he is not worrying — what is he thinking about instead? What is he doing instead? The same person could review what he has tried that has helped in the past.

A wise person said "what we focus on expands," therefore, noticing even small or seemingly insignificant positive changes can be helpful.

Our routines and old thinking patterns can be difficult to change, but often times these keep us "stuck" and interfere with us moving forward.

Therefore, we may need to force ourselves into new patterns. Interventions that can help include reading, writing and support groups.

The Internet, libraries and book stores are full of self-help books and resources. The following are useful. "What's Right with You?" by Barry Duncan, details a start to finish approach applicable to a range of difficulties. In the workbook, "Mind over Mood," cognitive psychologists Dennis Greenberger and Christine Padesky present tools to improve coping with depression, anxiety and anger. "Divorce Busting" by Michelle Weiner-Davis, is a brief but powerful paperback that couples who are struggling with marital difficulties can use to keep them moving forward between sessions. Terence Gorski's "Staying Sober" can be used by alcoholics and addicts to grow in their recovery.

Similar to the way we "get things off our chest" by talking to a trusted confidant, the exercise of putting pen to paper (or hands to keyboard) can result in a sense of release and increased clarity.

Writing becomes even more valuable when a patient also writes his goals and specific steps toward them.

The recovery (AA/NA) community has long known the strength of connecting with others who share their affliction. In addition to face-to-face meetings, the Web now offers support groups Online.

All that remains is to follow the "chalk-white arrows."