

MYTHS ABOUT PSYCHOTHERAPY

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Psychotherapy can be a powerful tool in transition and change. However many people exclude themselves because of misperceptions about what involves.

Myths

1. Psychotherapy is only for people who are mentally ill.
2. Psychotherapy only focuses on the past and more specifically on dredging up all the ghosts and baggage of the past. This myth of course has to involve bashing and blaming those who brought you up – mostly this would be your parents- and the way you were brought up.
3. A related myth is that psychotherapy focuses on ones victim-hood and helps to foster or maintain a sense that you were hard done by, emphasizing your hard life and justifying your position.
4. The most pervasive myth or stereotype of psychotherapy is that it involves a (mostly passive) therapist who listens intently, nods and occasionally makes an empathic comment on the person's feelings. This is how the job is seen to get done.
5. The myth that therapy is a never ending process that you are trapped into for years. Psychotherapy can be short term, medium term or long term depending on what has to be worked with and who has to be worked with.
6. The next myth is that anyone can practice psychotherapy – as long as you can dispense some advice, are known to be the one all your friends come to or have been on a counselling course. There is a difference between being a registered psychologist and doing a basic counselling skills course leading to becoming a counsellor. This is not to say that there is not a valuable place offered by counsellors for short term counselling in organizations, NGO's or church's. Provided they are registered with a professional body and work within their scope of competence. Other than that the work is directed by that person's own values and life experience or issues.

In fact the same should apply to the psychologist who you are seeing. All psychologists have to go through standardized training which is a minimum of 6 years which is studied over 3 university degrees and a supervised internship at a registered institution or organization. They also have to be registered with the Health Professionals Council of South Africa and to attend receive ongoing education each year they are in practice in order to remain registered. There are regular audits to see that one maintains the requirements of your profession. This makes psychologists accountable to a professional body and regulates the standard of training and practice.

To revisit the myths above and put into some perspective:-

Indeed some people who are seen by psychiatrists or psychologists are mentally ill i.e. have symptom clusters that cause significant enough problems for their view of reality to be seriously compromised. Schizophrenia and other psychotic disorders are examples of this.

However most people who go for therapy are people like you or I. Pretty ordinary. It is not likely that a therapist or others will see you as crazy if you take responsibility for trying to sort out something in your life that is not working.

Indeed sometimes therapy does involve, by necessity, taking a detailed history and using this to understand destructive and repetitive patterns in the present. The past is then used to make sense of things that would otherwise make no sense. An example of this is someone who was abused at a young age and continues to find themselves as an adult making choices that result in them being abused again.

The past can influence our choices and responses later, even when we don't realize it. The aim then of making sense of the past is to use it to make sense of the present and work towards making more constructive adult choices in the future. It is not to make people feel like victims. Its aim is to understand and empower.

Psychotherapy is not just about talking and feeling better. Telling your story is part of the process and the start of the intervention.

Beyond talking and being understood, therapy involves understanding yourself, making decisions for your future and learning new coping mechanisms. We call this becoming more conscious, aware, having the ability to reflect or having more insight into yourself and your and patterns of feeling, thinking and behaviour. And how you impact on others and respond to them. This should empower you to make constructive or life enhancing choices as to how you live.

Lesser known examples of how psychological theory is used practically by therapists are in the following examples:-

Positive psychology

The aim of positive psychology is to find the strengths and talents that enable individuals and communities to thrive and make life more fulfilling. Studies on what make individuals more resilient and on what conditions promote us to flourish are common. It also aims at helping people gain a sense of wellbeing, meaning and purpose.

The focus is on building up the constructive effects of positive emotions. Skills and resources to build positive emotions are taught. While negative emotions promote narrow survival oriented behaviours, positive emotions are believed to increase curiosity, broaden interactions with others and build up awareness.

Improving your Business

Coaching tools have their roots in psychology. This involves a structured process driven relationship in which values and motivation are examined and measurable goals set. From this, focused action plans can be defined. Various behavioural change tools and techniques are used to develop competencies and achieve sustainable goals.

The concept of emotional intelligence derives from different psychological theories. The idea here is that it doesn't matter how intelligent you are, if you do not handle your emotions you will not progress as much as you could in life. Emotional regulation is particularly important in all relationships including business relationships.

Performance

Many people look for mechanisms that will help them perform on a higher level. The concepts used are applied in performance in a number of areas e.g. sports, piano playing, business, motivation and spirituality.

Attentional theory underlies the principles of improving performance. This is commonly used in sports psychology. The main concept here is that of *flow* and *being in the zone*.

Flow is the mental state in which the person is fully immersed in what he or she is doing by a feeling of intense focus, full absorption and involvement in an activity. Similarly the zone is the place where the mind and body are united in purpose. There are specific mental skills that can be developed to enable the athlete to enter the zone.

Psychotherapy is highly individualized to her person's needs. There are many other approaches and aims of therapy.

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In summary however, psychotherapy is not so much about finding sickness as about promoting wellness and providing the understanding and skills to do this.