New to Therapy? Here's Your Playbook

What to Expect | Where to Start | How to Make the Most of Therapy

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Getting Started | Nobody Teaches You How to Do Therapy

Most people are never taught how to participate in therapy. What they know often comes from television, movies, other people's experiences, or assumptions about what therapy is supposed to look like.

You might wonder:

- What am I supposed to talk about?
- Do I need to know what's wrong or what needs fixing?
- Is my therapist going to tell me what to do?
- What if I'm not comfortable talking about emotions?
- How will I know if therapy is working?

The good news? You don't need to have the answers before you begin.

You don't need the right words, a complete understanding of yourself, or a perfectly defined problem. You don't even need to know exactly what you want to change.

Therapy is an opportunity to become more familiar with yourself, understand what's influencing your experiences, and develop a greater ability to navigate life in ways that work for you.

Think of this resource as a starting point. Not a checklist, an assignment, or another thing you need to get right.

Understanding What Therapy Is (And Isn't)

Therapy is a collaborative process of exploring what's happening in your life, understanding what influences your experiences, and considering what you might want to do differently.

Sometimes that means working through a specific challenge. Other times, it means recognizing patterns you've carried for years without realizing it.

Therapy IS an opportunity to:

- Better understand your thoughts, emotions, behaviors, and experiences.
- Explore patterns influencing your relationships, decisions, and well-being.
- Identify what's working, what's not, and what might need attention.
- Develop new skills, perspectives, and ways of responding.
- Explore difficult experiences without immediately needing to solve them.
- Practice making changes that align with your values and goals.

Therapy IS NOT:

- A test of how emotionally intelligent or self-aware you are.

- A place where you must have the right answers.
- Someone telling you how to live your life.
- An expectation that you share everything before you're ready.
- An endless process of talking about your childhood.
- A requirement to become a completely different person.

The objective isn't to fix who you are. It's to better understand yourself and expand your options.

Your Role | How to Participate in Therapy

Your therapist brings knowledge, perspective, questions, and tools. You bring your experiences, curiosity, and willingness to participate.

You don't have to be good at therapy. But there are ways to make the experience more useful.

Before Your Appointments | NOTICE

You don't need to prepare a presentation or arrive with an agenda. Simply pay attention to what's happening in your life.

- What has been bothering me?
- What went well or didn't go well recently?
- Did I experience a reaction I didn't fully understand?
- Is there something I've been avoiding or repeatedly thinking about?
- What might be useful to talk through?

Sometimes the most valuable thing you can bring is, "I don't know why this bothered me, but it did."

During Your Appointments | EXPLORE

Try approaching your experiences with curiosity rather than immediately explaining, justifying, defending, or solving them.

- **What happened?** The situation or experience.
- **What did I think?** The meaning or interpretation I gave it.
- **What did I feel?** The emotions or physical sensations I noticed.
- **What did I do?** My behavior, reaction, or response.
- **What might I want to understand or do differently?**

You can ask questions, disagree, request clarification, or tell your therapist when something doesn't feel helpful.

You can also say, "I don't know."

Between Appointments | PRACTICE

Therapy doesn't only happen during your appointment. Much of the learning comes from noticing what happens in everyday life and experimenting with different responses.

- Notice a familiar pattern.
- Try a different response.
- Observe what happens.
- Reflect on what worked and what didn't.
- Bring that experience back to therapy.

Understanding creates possibility. Practice creates experience. Reps make the difference.

Roadmap | Six Places to Begin

You don't need to explore everything at once. Consider these six areas as different starting points for understanding yourself and your experiences.

Start with what feels relevant.

UNDERSTAND YOURSELF

Why am I the way I am?

We develop ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving through our families, experiences, relationships, environments, and cultures.

Some of these patterns serve us well. Others may have been useful at one time but don't work as effectively today.

Explore:

- Family of origin and learned expectations.
- Identity, personality, values, and beliefs.
- Strengths, limitations, and capabilities.
- Roles you take on with other people.
- The difference between who you learned to be and who you want to become.

Ask Yourself: What have I learned about how I'm supposed to behave, succeed, handle difficulty, or show up for others?

Read and Explore on the website's Resources page: Understand the SELFs | Family of Origin | Identity Boot Camp | The Male Playbook

UNDERSTAND YOUR CONNECTIONS

Why do I respond to people the way I do?

Human beings are wired for connection, but we don't all experience closeness, independence, conflict, and emotional safety in the same ways.

Our attachment experiences and relationship histories can influence how we connect with others, particularly when we feel vulnerable, rejected, criticized, or disconnected.

Explore:

- Attachment and relationship patterns.
- Emotional safety and trust.
- Responses to closeness or distance.
- Reactions during conflict.
- Independence, interdependence, and connection.

Ask Yourself: When I feel disconnected, criticized, or uncertain about a relationship, what do I typically do?

Read and Explore on the website's Resources page: Relational Templates | Family of Origin | Differentiation

Listen: Back to Basics: Understanding All Things Attachment

UNDERSTAND YOUR AGENCY

What can I influence, and where do I get stuck?

Agency is your capacity to make choices, take action, and influence your experiences.

Sometimes we become so focused on circumstances, other people, expectations, or potential outcomes that we lose sight of what remains within our influence.

Agency doesn't mean controlling everything. It means recognizing where you have choices and learning how to use them.

Explore:

- Personal agency and self-efficacy.
- Locus of control and responsibility.
- Avoidance, hesitation, and uncertainty.
- Boundaries and decision-making.
- Reacting versus responding.

Ask Yourself: Where am I waiting for circumstances or other people to change before I take action?

Read and Explore on the website's Resources page**:** Choice Architecture | Capabilities | Boundaries

Listen: How to Make a Difference

UNDERSTAND YOUR EMOTIONS

What am I feeling, and what do I do with it?

Emotions are part of how we experience and interpret the world. They provide information about what matters to us, what feels threatening, what we need, and what we're experiencing.

Yet many of us were never taught how to identify, understand, or work with emotions.

Some learned to minimize them. Others learned to push through, stay busy, solve problems, or keep things to themselves.

Explore:

- Emotional awareness and vocabulary.
- Stress, anxiety, anger, sadness, and vulnerability.
- Thoughts, emotions, and behaviors.
- Emotional regulation versus emotional avoidance.
- How emotions influence decisions and relationships.

Ask Yourself: Which emotions am I comfortable experiencing, and which do I tend to avoid, dismiss, or struggle to express?

Read and Explore on the website's Resources page**:** Understanding Emotions | Understand the SELFs | Stress, Overwhelm & Burnout

Listen: 4 Ways Not to Be Owned by Your Sh*t

UNDERSTAND YOUR RELATIONSHIPS

How do I contribute to the patterns I experience with others?

Relationships are systems. What one person does influences the other, and those interactions can develop into predictable patterns.

Understanding your role doesn't mean accepting blame for everything that happens. It means recognizing your contributions, understanding other perspectives, and identifying opportunities to respond differently.

Explore:

- Communication and listening.
- Assumptions, expectations, and interpretations.
- Boundaries and differentiation.
- Conflict and repair.

- Connection, vulnerability, and emotional availability.

Ask Yourself: What patterns keep showing up in my relationships, and what might my role be in maintaining or changing them?

Read and Explore on the website's Resources page**:** Reflective Listening | Relational Templates | Differentiation | Words & Language

Listen: Changing Our Mental Maps

TURN UNDERSTANDING INTO ACTION

I understand what's happening. Now what?

Insight is valuable, but understanding something doesn't automatically change it.

Many familiar behaviors have been practiced for years. Developing new responses requires awareness, experimentation, repetition, and patience.

You don't need to change everything at once.

Explore:

- Recognizing patterns before they take over.
- Interrupting automatic responses.
- Trying new behaviors.
- Learning from setbacks.
- Building skills through repetition.

Ask Yourself: What's one small thing I could try differently the next time a familiar situation shows up?

Read and Explore on the website's Resources page**:** DO Therapy Exercise Series | Choice Architecture

Listen: Creatures of Habit

What Does Progress Look Like?

People often enter therapy expecting to feel better, solve a problem, or discover an answer.

Those are reasonable hopes. But progress isn't always immediate, linear, or obvious.

Sometimes progress looks like:

- Recognizing a reaction before it becomes a bigger problem.
- Identifying what you're feeling rather than ignoring or dismissing it.
- Becoming more comfortable with uncertainty or discomfort.
- Communicating something you previously kept to yourself.

- Responding rather than reacting.
- Recognizing familiar patterns sooner.
- Recovering more quickly after difficult experiences.
- Making decisions that better align with your values.
- Developing greater flexibility in how you approach situations.

Progress isn't always about experiencing fewer challenges. Sometimes it's about developing a greater capacity to navigate them.

You and your therapist can revisit what you're working toward, what's changing, and whether the approach is helping.

A Few Things Worth Remembering

- **You don't have to have it all figured out.** Understanding is something you develop through the process.
- **You don't have to share everything immediately.** Trust, comfort, and openness can develop over time.
- **You don't have to agree with your therapist.** Questions, disagreements, and feedback can be useful parts of the work.
- **You don't have to turn every feeling into a problem to solve.** Sometimes understanding and allowing an experience is the work.
- **You don't have to do everything perfectly.** Old habits will show up. That gives you something to notice, understand, and practice.
- **You have a voice in the process.** Therapy is collaborative. If something isn't working, bring it into the conversation.

Where Do I Start?

If you're uncertain where to begin, consider these three questions.

1. What brought me here?

- What am I experiencing, struggling with, curious about, or hoping might change?

2. What would I like to better understand?

- Myself? My emotions? My relationships? My choices? My reactions? A particular experience?

3. What might be one small sign that therapy is helping?

- What would I notice in my everyday life that tells me something is moving in a useful direction?

You don't need complete answers. These questions simply give us a place to start. **FROM KNOWING TO DOING** As you explore these topics, consider using the DO Therapy exercises to practice what you're learning.

NOTICE → REVIEW THE GAME TAPE → PRACTICE → BUILD REPS

The objective isn't to get everything right. It's to become more aware, more intentional, and more capable of choosing how you want to show up.

Test & Learn.

A Final Thought

You don't need to become an expert in psychology to benefit from therapy. You don't need to change your personality, abandon your strengths, or become someone you're not.

The opportunity is to better understand what influences you, recognize where you have choices, and develop a bigger range of ways to navigate your life.

You bring your experiences. We bring curiosity, perspective, and tools. Together, we figure out what might be useful.

Start where you are. Bring what you've got. We'll work from there.