

The Therapy Notes

By COR

IS THIS NORMAL!?

Why won't my therapist just tell me what to do?

By Dean Corbett

You've explained the problem. You've described the situation from every possible angle. You've even acknowledged that you might be contributing to it. Surely, by now, your therapist has an opinion. Instead, they ask what you think you should do.

Excellent. Another question.

Why won't they just give me an answer?

One reason is that therapists generally aren't there to make your decisions for you.

They might help you understand why you find it impossible to say no, why you repeatedly end up in similar relationships, or why disappointing somebody feels like a personal catastrophe.

But deciding whether to leave your job, end your relationship or confront your mother is ultimately your decision.

And there's a sensible reason for that.

Your therapist doesn't have to live with the consequences. You do.

But there's a difference between helping somebody think for themselves and leaving them to work everything out alone.

Isn't advice sometimes useful?

Of course it is; we all seek advice. Sometimes we need information, another perspective or somebody to point out something obvious that we've somehow managed to overlook. Therapy can offer those things, too.

Some approaches are relatively structured and practical. Others focus more on exploring feelings, relationships and the meaning we attach to experiences.

A therapist might ask questions, offer observations, suggest exercises or help you consider different ways of responding.

What they generally try to avoid is becoming the person who makes your decisions.

Because if therapy only teaches you to ask somebody else what to do, you might eventually become very good at asking somebody else what to do.

Which rather defeats the purpose.

What if I need more help than I'm getting?

Then it's worth saying so.

Perhaps you're comfortable exploring your feelings but would appreciate more practical strategies. Perhaps you've spent several sessions understanding why you behave in a particular way and now want to explore how to change it. Or perhaps your therapist's approach simply isn't what you expected.

None of that means you're approaching therapy incorrectly.

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Wanting guidance doesn't mean you want somebody else to take responsibility for your life.

And a therapist should be able to explain what kind of guidance they can offer.

Something worth asking your therapist

"I understand that you don't want to make decisions for me, but sometimes I'd find it helpful to have more direction. Could we talk about how we might work together differently?"

You might find that a small adjustment makes therapy considerably more useful.

Or you might discover that a different therapeutic approach would suit you better.

Either is worth knowing.

A little of the science

Psychotherapy isn't one single method. Different approaches vary in how much structure, guidance and practical activity they involve.

Research on client preferences suggests that people have different expectations about therapist directiveness, and that accommodating preferences where appropriate can support better outcomes.

The important question isn't whether a therapist gives advice.

It's whether the way you're working together is appropriate, understood and useful.

Reference

Swift, J. K., Callahan, J. L., Cooper, M., & Parkin, S. R. (2018). *The impact of accommodating client preference in psychotherapy: A meta-analysis*. [Read the research](#).