

The Therapy Notes

By COR

Am I just paying someone to listen to me?

You do most of the talking. Your therapist listens, occasionally asks a question, and sometimes says very little at all. And you can't help wondering: Couldn't I just have this conversation with a friend?

It's a perfectly reasonable question.

After all, we talk to people about our problems and experiences all the time. Friends listen, partners offer advice, and sometimes a good conversation over a cup of coffee or something stronger can make the world feel considerably less overwhelming.

So what exactly makes therapy different?

Isn't it just a conversation?

Well, yes. And no.

At its heart, psychotherapy is a conversation between two human beings. There's no magic involved, and therapists don't have a special ability to see inside your head.

What they do have (and should have!), is training in noticing things that can be difficult to recognise in ourselves or for non-trained people to recognise and tell you about.

Perhaps you apologise every time you express an opinion. Perhaps you laugh when describing something painful. Or perhaps you spend twenty minutes explaining why somebody else's behaviour was unacceptable, before

finding several reasons to blame yourself.

A good therapist will become curious about those moments. Not because they're trying to catch you out, but because **the way we talk about our experiences can sometimes reveal as much as the experiences themselves.**

And, unlike a conversation with a friend, therapy gives you a space where you don't have to worry about reciprocating, being entertaining, or asking how the other person's week has been.

For once, the conversation really can be about you.

But shouldn't my therapist be doing more?

Possibly.

There's a difference between listening carefully and simply sitting quietly.

Some therapists work in ways that involve relatively little direct intervention. Others ask questions, offer observations, challenge assumptions or introduce practical exercises.

Neither approach is automatically better. What matters is whether the way you're working together is helping you.

Research has consistently found that the quality of the relationship between therapist and client is associated with how well therapy works.

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But that doesn't mean that having a lovely relationship with your therapist is enough.

You can feel understood, supported and genuinely fond of your therapist while still wondering whether anything in your life is changing.

And that's an entirely legitimate thing to wonder.

So, what am I actually paying for?

Ideally, you're paying for more than somebody's attention.

You're paying for their very specialist, research-informed training, their judgement, their extensive professional responsibilities and their ability to help you understand yourself in ways that might be difficult to achieve alone or with friends / family.

Sometimes that involves being listened to in a way you've rarely experienced before.

Sometimes it involves being gently challenged.

And sometimes it involves hearing something you hadn't quite wanted to acknowledge.

Good therapy isn't necessarily about having somebody tell you something you don't know. It can be about discovering something you already knew, but hadn't quite understood.

That said, you shouldn't have to take it on faith that every conversation is doing you good.

Something worth asking your therapist

"Sometimes I wonder how our conversations are helping me. Could we explore what we're working towards and how we'll know if it's making a difference?"

It's not an unreasonable question. It's not rude, ungrateful or a criticism of your therapist.

It's **your** therapy, after all.

And understanding what you're getting from it seems like a rather good place to start.

A little of the science

Research suggests that the relationship between a therapist and their client - including trust, collaboration and agreement about what they're working towards - is an important part of effective psychotherapy and counselling.

A large review of 295 studies involving more than 30,000 clients found a consistent association between the quality of this relationship and therapy outcomes.

But the relationship isn't everything. Research also suggests that paying attention to clients' preferences, including how actively they want their therapist to work, can contribute to better engagement and outcomes.² In other words, **feeling heard matters.**

But so does feeling helped.

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References

1. Flückiger, C., Del Re, A. C., Wampold, B. E., & Horvath, A. O. (2018). *The Alliance in Adult Psychotherapy: A Meta-Analytic Synthesis*. *Psychotherapy*, 55(4), 316–340.
2. Swift, J. K., Callahan, J. L., Cooper, M., & Parkin, S. R. (2018). *The Impact of Accommodating Client Preference in Psychotherapy: A Meta-Analysis*. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*.