

The Therapy Notes

By COR

What if I don't feel better after six sessions?

By Dean Corbett

So, you've given therapy a go; turned up, opened up, and perhaps even surprised yourself with what you've talked about. But six sessions later, you're wondering whether anything has actually changed.

First things first: **You haven't failed at therapy.** And it doesn't necessarily mean therapy has failed you, either.

Six sessions can be enough to make a meaningful difference. You might find yourself worrying a little less, sleeping a little better, or responding differently to something that would previously have ruined your day.

Or you might not. Perhaps you've spent those six sessions getting comfortable enough with your therapist. Perhaps you've only just found the words for something you've carried around for years. Or perhaps you've talked about plenty of things, but still aren't sure what any of it is supposed to be achieving.

All of these experiences are worth taking seriously.

So, how long is therapy supposed to take?

The slightly frustrating answer is: It depends.

Research shows that some people benefit from relatively brief therapy, while others need considerably longer.

It depends on what brings you to therapy, what you're hoping to change, the kind of therapy you're having, and a whole host of things happening in your life outside the therapy room.

There really is no magic number of sessions.

And while six sessions might be a useful starting point, it's really important to remember that six sessions aren't a 'deadline' for feeling better.

There's something equally important to remember: Therapy shouldn't become an endless exercise in turning up and hoping for the best. You and your therapist should be able to talk about what's changing, what isn't, and whether the work you're doing together is helping.

We're not always dealing with something that started yesterday

Here's something worth thinking about.

By the time most of us arrive in therapy, we've spent years - sometimes decades - developing the ways we think, feel and respond to and live in the world.

We've learned how to protect ourselves from disappointment, how to navigate all types of relationships, how to earn approval, how to avoid rejection, and what we need to do to feel safe, valued or loved.

Some of those lessons have served us remarkably well. Others might have been useful once but aren't quite so helpful anymore.

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And most of the time, we haven't consciously chosen any of them. They've simply become part of how we experience ourselves and the world around us.

So when we come to therapy hoping to feel less anxious, become more confident, improve our relationships or stop repeating a familiar pattern, **we might be trying to change something that has taken much of our lives to develop.**

Think about that for a moment. If you've spent twenty years believing that disappointing somebody means letting them down, understanding where that belief came from might be an important first step.

But understanding something and feeling differently about it aren't necessarily the same thing.

You might intellectually recognise that you're allowed to say no, while still feeling terribly guilty every time you do.

And that's where some of the deeper work of therapy can begin.

Not simply understanding why we do what we do, but gradually discovering that we have other ways of responding.

We can't always expect six 50-minute sessions to 'undo' twenty years of experience. But those six hours might be where something starts to change.

What if nothing seems to have changed?

Here's a question worth considering:

- What would feeling better actually look like for you?
- Would it mean fewer anxious thoughts?
- Being kinder to yourself?
- Having the difficult conversation you've been avoiding?
- Feeling less overwhelmed by things you can't control?

Sometimes progress is quieter than we expect. Sometimes it's difficult to see from the inside. And sometimes, despite everyone's best intentions, therapy simply isn't helping in the way we'd hoped. That's worth knowing, too.

Something worth asking your therapist

"We've had six sessions now, and I'm not sure how much has changed. Could we look at where we started, where we are now, and what might help next?"

You might decide to continue, you might try a different approach, you might take a break.

The important thing is that you get to be part of that decision. Therapy is something you do with somebody, not something that's done to you.

A little of the science

There's good reason to review therapy rather than simply count sessions. For example, the National Institute for Care Excellence (NICE) recommends reviewing how treatment for depression is working within the first two to four weeks.

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And a 2023 research review found that regularly checking clients' progress and using their feedback to guide treatment can improve outcomes, although the benefits vary. In other words, asking "Is this helping?" isn't questioning the value of therapy. It's part of making therapy better.

References

- NICE (2022). Depression in adults: treatment and management (NG222).
- Barkham, M., de Jong, K., Delgadillo, J. & Lutz, W. (2023). Routine Outcome Monitoring (ROM) and Feedback: Research Review and Recommendations. *Psychotherapy Research*, 33(7), 841–855.