What Are The Goals Psychotherapy?

Counseling is not therapy. Counseling is getting advice, opinions, and instructions from a knowledgeable source. Counseling may temporarily change the way you act, but it doesn't address your natural tendency to act the way you do. Psychotherapy has a far different set of objectives that are really quite mainstream.

Unlike counseling, people come to therapy not just to resolve a set of current troublesome difficulties, but to outgrow and master the underlying cause(s) of those difficulties. People come because they want to get at the attitudes and feelings that make them vulnerable to particular problems. They understand that they may stop behaving in a self-destructive way, but it takes considerable time and work to get to a place where they no longer have the tendency to do so. Although I believe that relief from a particular problem is a primary objective, my idea of progress goes beyond this. As a psychotherapist for over 35 years, my objective has always been to help people progress toward understanding the unique way they organize their knowledge, experience, emotion and behave accordingly. Here are some areas of development I consider when assessing progress in psychotherapy.

INSIGHT: This is the most popular and the most misunderstood measure of progress people have about psychotherapy. The characterization is of a "therapist" patiently "explaining" to the patient why he/she has a particular symptom. The patient, thus informed, is magically relieved of the problem. The reality is that progress via insight is an on-going process, where the therapist and the client reconstruct together a narrative that makes sense of the client's background and predicament. This kind of understanding can help lend perspective to what often feels like arbitrary and random states of distress. It is a variation of the ancient convention - understanding the truth can set you free.

DEPENDENCY: I often hear people (especially men), say they don't believe in therapy. They don't need help, and they will handle their problems on their own. The fact is we all need other people. Therapy does not take dependent people and make them independent of needing others but helps them manage their dependent needs according to their best interests. It doesn't take independent but emotionally distant people and make them helplessly dependent, but helps them accept their legitimate need for others. Many adults enter therapy feeling like a child trapped in destructive relationships or believing there is something dangerous about their need for others. Progress in psychotherapy is discovering that it's not this basic need that's the problem but their way of handling it. It's progressing from childlike dependency to mature adult dependency

CONTROL: Most people come to therapy because something is compromising their ability to feel in control of their own lives. That is, they feel controlled by their depression or their anxiety. They have lost the sense of being the master of their own ship or they have come because they have never felt in charge of their life. Progress in psychotherapy is the emerging feeling of getting back in control of your own life. Typical comments of patients I have worked with that reflect this are "I learned to trust my feelings," "I overcame my addiction" or "I learned to set limits and not feel guilty."
IDENTITY: "What's it all about?", "Who am I?" or "What is my purpose in life?" Such existential questions often reflect the quintessential identity crises. Many people have been raised to disavow perceptions, beliefs and feelings in their families of origin. As adults, they express these conflicts in symptomatic ways like depression or chronic relationship difficulties. Progress in psychotherapy involves on-going efforts at identifying your own feelings, attitudes and motivations. It encourages you to experience and verbalize who you are, what you believe and what you want.

SELF-ESTEEM: Even in the most confident of people, self esteem can be fragile, as anyone who has ever felt a good mood dissolve in the face of unexpected criticism understands. In psychotherapy, it is NOT having a therapist "saying nice things" about people or "building up their image." Progress in psychotherapy is about helping people develop a more realistic and accepting attitude toward themselves. People often discover that areas they consider "terrible shortcomings" are actually ordinary rather than terrible, can be modified and are by no means the whole picture of their personality.

RECOGNIZE AND HANDLE FEELINGS: Research has provided solid evidence that openness to feelings is associated with physical well-being, but one of the most common misconceptions I encounter in therapy is that an emotionally healthy person is "uninhibited." Sometimes people come to therapy fearful that in order to make progress, they must lose emotional control. In fact, therapy has much to do with feelings but nothing to do with the idea that they should always be freely expressed. Progress in psychotherapy is about helping people develop ways of using emotional energy in the service of problem solving. Emotional maturity is knowing what you're feeling, why you feel that way and having the freedom of choice to handle those feelings in ways that benefit your self and others.

EGO STRENGTH: Psychotherapists define "ego strength" as one's capacity to cope with life's difficulties in a realistic and adaptive way. We are familiar with stories about how one child with many advantages deteriorates into helplessness under mild stress, while another with a more challenging set of life circumstances finds ways to cope with conditions that would defeat most of us. Therefore, one of the more frequent unspoken reasons for people seeking therapy is their desire to change their tendency to "fall apart" when life gets difficult. Progress in psychotherapy increases a person's ability to tolerate temporary states of destabilization in the service of growth.

Obviously such desirable progress in psychotherapy cannot be achieved in five or even 20 sessions. Yet the corporate "take over" of the mental health care system has restricted many people to exactly such a short-term therapy relationship. "Therapy" has been redefined by managed care as a non-confidential relationship that may be arbitrarily stopped by some bureaucratic directive at any point. This current pressure by the insurance industry to redefine psychotherapy as a set of short, symptom-targeted procedures is antithetical to everything we understand about the nature of human development. It is not surprising then, that I often meet people who claim they have "tried therapy" under these conditions and found it lacking.

In 1933, Sigmund Freud stated that the ultimate goal of psychotherapy is...
the capacity to love and to work. Progress in psychotherapy involves a slow acceptance of the fact that psychological problems reflect accidents of a complicated fate and endowment, not some personal defect. Once accepted, additional progress involves the painful appreciation that although this may be the case, with help, only the client can be responsible for solving these problems. When there is progress in psychotherapy, patients find they feel more accepting not only of themselves but also of the complexities and shortcomings of others. By seeing the big picture, they take disappointments less personally and can forgive themselves for what they now understand and control.

This Information is Excerpted from “Psychoanalytic Case Formulation” by Nancy McWilliams