

Contradictions in Mental Health Care No Reason Not to Seek Help

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For many years, I benefited enormously from a form of psychotherapy very similar to psychoanalysis. Such counseling is available to all state employees and paid for in part through the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) and the mental health services, included in our medical insurance. My positive experience prompts me to remind you of both the availability of this resource and some of its potential drawbacks and contradictions. I am describing these drawbacks not to discourage you from seeking help, but to give you more insight into the helping process.

Having emotional problems is only one reason to seek personal counseling from a trained psychotherapist. Another reason for personal counseling is the search for personal growth and superior mental health. If we spend many years and many thousands of dollars obtaining an intellectual education, why not devote energy and money to improving our emotional functioning?

I continued my counseling sessions for many years. After all, I went to college and graduate school for 11 years, so it made sense to attempt to obtain the emotional equivalent of a PhD. I devoted the time and money (above what my health insurance paid) to achieve that goal.

I must warn you that psychotherapy costs between \$80 and \$125 per 50-minute session. Insurance companies limit the number of sessions allotted annually, in an effort to protect their bottom line. If your treatment goal is emotional growth rather than correction of a diagnosed psychiatric problem, you can expect very limited help from your health insurance provider.

Our emotional growth and emotional education are often limited to what we absorb informally from parents, teachers, relatives, and friends. These personal contacts may not give us sufficient opportunity to talk extensively about our feelings and receive feedback on how those feelings compare with what is really

happening. After all, our parents, teachers, relatives, and friends may lack the emotional maturity to help us with our problems. Besides that, they are not trained counselors.

Unfortunately, at its extreme, emotional immaturity can cause failure in careers, family, and personal lives. It can trigger severely disturbed feelings all our lives. We can pass these feelings on to the next generation in the form of alcoholism, child abuse, or other dysfunctional behavior. Alcohol hides feelings. An inability to handle emotions can cause alcoholics to inadvertently teach their children to hide their emotions with alcohol, too.

Not only do we have very few ways to gain emotional maturity, but our society generally discourages people from seeking help with their emotional problems. If we break a bone or have heart disease, we can seek medical help, yet if our emotions need repair, we are supposed to keep that a secret and fix the problems ourselves without outside help.

A primary form of assistance with emotional problems is psychotherapy, an educational process that teaches people to cope with their emotions after they have failed to do so on their own. It teaches people to handle their own emotions and relate to others. Unfortunately, most people do not view psychotherapy as education, but as a corrective process for people with some fundamental human inadequacy. This perspective discourages many people from seeking the psychotherapy they need to live happier, more productive lives.

Because of this popular view, people who receive psychotherapy learn to be secretive about it and often are ashamed that they must receive additional emotional education. (It's a good thing that people are not secretive and shameful about their intellectual and physical education!) People who see psychotherapists keep it a secret, for fear it will reflect badly on them. It took me several years to develop enough self-esteem to be willing to reveal publicly that I am benefited from that service. I am only revealing it now, as a way of encouraging fellow employees to benefit from a process which I find very helpful.

Other contradictions surround obtaining assistance with emotional problems. While our society views psychotherapy clients as crazy or

emotionally inadequate, it applauds the psychoanalysts (psychotherapists who have undergone specialized psychoanalytic training) as wise and helpful people. Yet to become a psychoanalyst, you first must undergo psychoanalysis which is essentially a form of psychotherapy lasting many years. Thus, if you undergo a moderate amount of psychotherapy, you are considered emotionally disturbed. Yet if you undergo extensive counseling, you are considered very wise. That makes no sense at all!

While psychotherapy is a system full of contradictions, it is still a system that has helped millions of people. If your life circumstance becomes difficult, remember that a limited number of psychotherapy sessions are available to all state employees annually, as part of our medical insurance. Don't pass them up!