

The Therapeutic Process

The therapeutic process in counselling and psychotherapy is the dynamic interaction between client and therapist progressing along a structured and collaborative course of therapy. This generally follows three phases: beginning phase (engagement and assessment), middle phase (intervention and challenge), ending phase (review and closure).

Beginning Phase (Engagement and Assessment)

Contracting

Establishing protocols, limits of confidentiality, boundaries, expectations for therapy and goals.

Building Rapport

Establishing a safe, non-judgmental, confidential and trusting relationship.

Client is given space to tell their story.

Empathising, attuning and validating.

Assessment & Formulation

Risk assessment to evaluate a client's potential for suicide, self-harm or harm to others.

Identifying the client's presenting issues, exploring their history and gathering information.

The therapist works to understand the client's problems, the core issues driving their need for help and develop a treatment plan.

Self-Care and Coping Strategies

Self-care and coping strategies (grounding techniques, stress management, emotional regulation and healthy lifestyle) are effective interventions in their own right for presenting issues and they also give the client the means to cope during their therapy. Therapy can be stressful and destabilising due to the processing of trauma and letting go of old beliefs, attitudes, behaviours and defences. Psychological transition temporarily disrupts internal stability preceding positive change and personal growth.

Outcome

Client understands the contract and limits of confidentiality.

Client experiences a rapport with therapist.

Client feels heard and therapist gathers key information.

Both therapist and client know what they are working toward.

Treatment plan.

Client starts learning coping strategies.

Client starts gaining insight.

Middle Phase (Intervention and Challenge)

Deeper Exploration

Exploring underlying beliefs.

Linking past experiences with the present.

Developing insight.

Understanding patterns and root causes.

Making connections.

Intervention

Utilising psychoeducation, therapeutic techniques or interventions to address issues, change patterns, increase self-awareness and develop new coping skills. Interventions are suggested and clients may consent or decline. This facilitates the client's relational need of experiencing agency in the therapeutic relationship and fosters the client's autonomy.

Client Resistance

Resistance is a natural and often unconscious defence mechanism where clients oppose progression of treatment to protect themselves from emotional pain, vulnerability or fear of change. It can present as silence, excessive talking to block out the therapist, missed appointments or intellectualisation and should be viewed as useful information rather than personal defiance. Effective management involves navigating this with empathy, normalisation and collaborative discussion of the resistance itself.

Challenge

Effective therapy balances empathy and challenge, pushing clients beyond comfort zones for real growth and lasting change. Challenge in therapy can be when a therapist gently questions a client's limiting beliefs or incongruent statements to help them recognise negative thinking patterns or inconsistencies. Or the therapist may offer the client an insight or alternative perspective to consider. Challenge fosters growth and self-awareness. It is used respectfully and timed appropriately to encourage personal growth, not to criticise or confront harshly.

Outcome

Greater insight, self-awareness and emotional processing.

Client gains confidence in applying skills independently.

Reduction of client's issues and distress.

Clients increase their autonomy.

Ending Phase (Review and Closure)**Maintenance**

Developing a plan to sustain changes independently.

Signpost to other services if required.

Review

Invite the client to review their experience of therapy.

Closure

Dealing with the emotional work of ending the therapeutic relationship.

Outcome

Client leaves with tools and a plan for maintaining progress.

Client is aware of their personal growth and increased autonomy.

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