DEVELOPING GOALS FOR THERAPY

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People often expect that therapy will involve talking mainly about (A) their feelings, and (B) the past. Let's discuss this.

Feelings are important. Indeed, people usually seek therapy when they are in emotional pain. You will need to be able to discuss your feeling and have a sense that your therapist understands you and what you are going through. Sometimes it helps just to know that somebody is really listening and trying to help you sort through your feelings, thoughts, and experiences.

But will talking about your feeling be enough to promote change? I don't think so. To quote John Walter and Jane Peller (1992), "it is much easier to act your way to a feeling than to feel your way to a new action. It is easier to take an action and your feelings may change. If you wait for a feeling first, you may wait a long time."

Like feelings, the past is important as well. We are, after all, a product of all of our previous life experiences and decisions. Some discussion of the past may help shed light on how things got to where they are, as well as how you have come to look at things the way that you do. But will talking about the past necessarily change the future? Will it help us achieve our goals and improve your quality of life? Generally, I think the answer is, "No."

I would assert that therapy would be more useful if we are able to identify clearly defined, future-oriented goals to work towards. First we need to pinpoint the specific problems that you are having, and then we need to translate these problems into well-formed goals. This is easier said than done for most people.

Without specific goals, therapy is less likely to be effective. Discussions will be diffuse and lack focus, and we will tend to drift from topic to topic without really accomplishing anything. You will be more likely to focus on past events that have already happened, external situations that you have little control over, or how bad you feel. Although you may obtain some relief from ventilating, you will be unlikely to make any significant changes in your life. To maximize the effectiveness of therapy, we need a clear sense of where we are trying to go to and the incremental steps that you need to take to get there.

Consequently, the first stage of therapy must be devoted to clarifying the specific problems that you are dissatisfied with, and then translating these problems into well-formed goals. You will probably need your therapist's help to do the effectively, but you can begin to think this through yourself. After you pinpoint the problems that you need to work on, consider the following questions to help you translate the problems into goals:

- If this is a problem for me, what needs to be my goal? What has to be different for me to be on track to attaining this goal?
- What will I have to do to accomplish this goal?
- What would be one specific step that I could take that would move me a little closer to this goal? What would be some other steps?
- What belief would I have to develop to make attainment of this goal possible?
- What exactly do I need to do to shape my future in the way that I want to?
- What would I have to be doing instead of what I am doing now to achieve my goals?
- How do I want to be feeling by the time therapy is completed? What has to be different in my life in order for me to feel that way?
- Suppose tonight there is a miracle. You wake up tomorrow and your life is more like you want it to be. Your problems are solved, or you are reasonably confident that you’re on the path to solving them. What exactly will you be doing and thinking differently?
- What would others see that would tell them you are feeling differently?
- Close your eyes and create a mental movie of the way you would like for things to be. Imagine that you are taking steps to solving your problems. What does this tell you about the goals we need to strive for?

**SMART SYSTEM**

You might find it helpful to use the SMART system of goal setting. SMART is an acronym that will help you remember the qualities of effective, well-formed goals. Effective goals are:

Specific  Measurable  Action-oriented  Realistic  Timed

Let’s discuss each of these qualities.

**Well-Formed Goals Are Specific**

What **exactly** do you want to accomplish? The more specific the goal, the better the chance we can figure out what needs to happen to achieve it. The goal “get in shape” is not specific enough. “Be able to complete a 5 kilometer run” is sufficiently specific. “I want to feel better” doesn’t give us anything to grab onto. What has to happen in order feel better? “I want to get a different job that allows me to spend more time with my family on the evenings and weekend” is a more specific goal.

**Well-Formed Goals Are Measurable**

Unless a goal is measurable, we have no way to determine if you are making progress. Generally, how you feel is a poor way to measure progress. Feeling fluctuate a great deal; they go up and down. And you often don’t have complete control over how you feel. Besides, sometimes feelings are the “caboose of the train.” This is, often feelings change as a **consequence** of solving problems, taking constructive steps to improve your quality of life, and modifying dysfunctional beliefs.

Suppose, for example, you have decided that negative thinking is a problem for you. If you would like to be able to think more constructively, we need to think of a way to measure if you are on track with that general goal. A tool that most patients find helpful for learning skills to modify negative thoughts is Thought Records. We might measure if you are on track by setting a goal of completing three Thought Records each week, gradually developing skills to more effective counter negative thoughts with “Adaptive Responses.”
Well-Formed Goals Are Action-Oriented

Your goals will be more useful if you determine the specific actions that must be taken to make headway towards life improvement. Suppose one of your problems is a sense of loneliness and lack of a support network. The goal “Reduce loneliness” at first glance seems reasonable, but on closer inspection it doesn’t tell us what actions you need to take. See if you can take the initial goal one or two steps further and identify what you might do to reduce loneliness. Ask yourself:

- What specifically do I need to do to reduce loneliness?
- What would I have to be doing differently than I’m doing at present?
- Let me fantasize that I’m taking steps to reduce loneliness. What actions would I be taking?

After considering these and other questions, I might reformulate my goal as follows: “Go to at least one social activity each week. At each social activity, I will start two or more conversations and make a point of sharing information about myself.”

Well-Formed Goals Are Realistic

Setting unrealistic goals will be counterproductive, and will lead to a sense of defeat. Consider these goals and ask yourself if they are realistic:

- Never get anxious again
- Think only positive thoughts
- Become self-actualized
- Improve my parents’ marriage
- Avoid all sweets

None of these goals is realistic. Even people who are usually optimistic have occasional negative thoughts. Anxiety is a fundamental human emotion that we are all “wired” to experience. It is no more realistic to demand to never feel anxious that it would be to “never feel sad,” or “never feel excited.” Improving somebody else’s marriage is beyond our control. “Becoming self-actualized” is so vague we cannot possibly have any idea of what that means or requires. And, generally speaking, trying to completely avoid a certain type of food simply makes that food more desirable.
Well-Formed Goals Are Timed

It can be useful to attempt to develop a time frame for a goal or the steps involved in achieving the goal. This helps you determine if you are on track or if you are sufficiently committed to the requirements of the goal. Having a time frame will help you focused and will give you a certain motivational challenge, thereby, mobilizing your resources. For example:

- Contact 25 people and ask them about jobs in the next two months
- Practice relaxation exercises 15 minutes each day, 5 days per week for the next three months
- Write two pages each day for the next 30 days and then re-evaluate
- Identify 10 colleges I might want to attend, and send for literature by April 1st
- Improve my relationships with my kids by spending 30 minutes each day just talking with them

Use the ideas contained in this handout to stimulate your thinking about the goals you want to attain as a result of therapy. Don't worry if you don't know how to attain the goal. This is the process of therapy. The point here, however, is that we stand a much better chance of getting somewhere if we have a reasonably clear idea of where it is we are trying to get to and if those goals conform to the SMART criteria.