

P·E·E·R

PROGRAM FOR EXTRAORDINARY EXPERIENCE RESEARCH

An Experiencers Guide to Therapy

An extraordinary experience, one that doesn't fit our usual understanding of reality, can be difficult to explain to friends and family. While some people are comfortable having such experiences, others undergo a range of post-traumatic effects. Symptoms like nightmares, intrusive thoughts and memories, and difficulty concentrating are the mind's natural ways of dealing with an experience that is not clearly understood.

Whether you have people you can talk with or not, a good therapist or healer can help you gain skills and insights that will enable you to handle your experiences more effectively. People who feel they may have had an extraordinary experience, "experiencers," may benefit from the support of a therapist. We have prepared these guidelines to help with that process.

CONTEMPLATING AN OUTCOME

The following is a list of questions you might ask yourself before you begin seeking a therapist.

It is not necessary to have well-formed answers for all of these questions. They are meant to serve as a guide to help you organize your thoughts, and to prepare you for the issues you will be likely to address with a therapist.

Questions to consider:

- Why now? What is happening in your life that causes you to act on this interest at this time?
- What do you want to accomplish by going into therapy at this time? Do you have a specific goal in mind?
- In what areas of your life are you experiencing problems? For example, are you having difficulty meeting goals, concentrating, building satisfying relationships, operating from self-assurance and self-trust, to name just a few?
- What moods or emotions are you trying to alter? For example, you might imagine shifting such moods as:
 - anxiety or fear toward inner calm and peace;
 - resentment or anger toward acceptance or forgiveness;
 - resignation or depression toward hopefulness and engagement.
- How will you know when you have achieved your goals? What will be different in your life?

For example, your results may look something like:

- "I would be more effective in managing my emotions. I would be in better control of my feelings and responses."
- "My personal relationships would be more satisfying."
- "I would be able to trust myself more easily, and would therefore have less self-doubt."
- "I would be more effective at work and in my career."

Giving some thought to these questions will make it easier for you to be clear about what you are looking for as you begin to consider therapy.

WHAT CAN A THERAPIST DO FOR YOU?

Psychotherapy is designed to help people resolve emotional, behavioral, or interpersonal problems so that their quality of life is improved. The right psychotherapist, or therapist, can help you in a number of ways.

Social Support

Many experiencers who come to us feel very much alone; they feel that they are unable to share what has happened to them because they fear ridicule, or they fear what they might evoke in people who might believe them. At the same time, it is very difficult to be alone with these experiences. In general, it is useful to have someone to talk to. For many people, having a caring, supportive listener available on a regular basis is very stabilizing.

Problem solving

A therapist can help you think through difficulties you are having at work or at home. Sometimes experiencers are so overwhelmed by extraordinary material that they may feel they do not have the energy to deal with more mundane problems. This is common, and natural under the circumstances. However, thinking through everyday problems with someone who understands the greater context of your life can greatly reduce your overall stress level, and leave you with a better sense of control. This will make your more extraordinary experiences easier to handle.

Coping skills

A therapist trained in cognitive and behavioral therapy can help by teaching you specific coping skills to deal with upsetting material that can intrude in your daily life. Relaxation techniques, recognition of self-defeating behavior patterns, mindfulness exercises, and even forms of self-hypnosis are taught to help people develop a variety of valuable coping skills. These are the means by which people calm the body and put intrusive thoughts aside until the time is right for dealing with them.

Hypnosis and “memory recovery”

Some individuals feel that many aspects of their lives are stable, but that they carry unconscious material that needs attention. They may feel some anxiety and urgency in relation to this material. They often believe that this material is memory of past experience held out of consciousness due to its traumatic or unusual nature, and that knowing the “truth” will alleviate their distress.

People sometimes seek hypnosis to explore and uncover “buried memories” in order to relieve their distress. Hypnosis and similar relaxation methods are simple tools that people use to enter a relaxed, nonordinary psychological state where they can have access to internal information that is not usually available to them.

Hypnosis is the subject of a great deal of research and debate and, in scientific circles, information recovered under hypnosis is generally judged to be less reliable than conscious memories. For example, information retrieved under hypnosis is not admissible in many courts of law. We have found that people who obtain images that seem to be memories under hypnosis often have doubts about the objective reality of these memories afterwards. Our understanding is that some of the images recovered under hypnosis are memories of past experience, while others are symbolic representations of important personal matters, and it may be quite difficult to distinguish between the two. Thus, hypnosis as a means to recover the “real truth” may prove to be quite disappointing.

However, hypnosis or another relaxation method can be effective in helping individuals come to terms with traumatic experiences. Hypnosis can help people gain control over their pain and their anxiety because, in hypnosis, people can gain insight through imagining and practicing new behaviors. We have found that many people who remain unsure as to the “reality” of their experiences can use hypnosis to feel more resolved in their day-to-day living.

Changing long-term, problematic patterns of behavior in relationships and work

A therapist can help you examine and change various deep-seated assumptions you have about yourself, your intimate relationships, and your life by looking at the formative relationships and events that you have experienced. It is thought that by understanding the past, people can make more conscious choices about the present. Often unwanted, unconscious patterns of behavior show up in the therapeutic relationship itself, and these patterns may be recognized and become part of a therapeutic discussion. Although recognition and discussion of these patterns may occur in many forms of therapy, in psychodynamic therapy past experience and its impact on the therapist-patient relationship is the central focus. Psychodynamic therapy is usually long-term.

THE HELPING PROFESSIONS

Anomalous experiences are a relatively new area for the therapeutic and healing professions. Some people find that, because of the nature of their experiences, they are most comfortable seeking assistance in the alternative healing communities. Others feel that an open-minded psychotherapist with traditional training or even training in trauma is best equipped to handle the symptoms of post-traumatic stress that some people encounter after extraordinary experiences. Our initial interview and consultation guidelines, below, focus on choosing a psychotherapist; however, a careful interview is important before establishing any healing relationship, and the guidelines are easily adapted for interviewing in any of the healing professions.

The term “psychotherapist” is a generic term, and anyone can use the title of psychotherapist. People who call themselves psychotherapists represent a wide range of backgrounds, training, and expertise, and may or may not be trained members of any of the helping professions. The major therapeutic professions are described below. All types of psychotherapy are practiced by members of all the professions, so it is generally not necessary to choose a therapist solely on the basis of profession. However, it may be helpful to have an understanding of the general background of anyone to whom you are referred.

In general, there is no guarantee of proficiency in psychotherapy. However, individuals who are members of a psychotherapy association, who have been trained at a psychoanalytic institute, or who have received training at a hospital clinic where psychotherapy is practiced are most likely to have acquired good skills.

The major therapeutic professions

A psychiatrist is a physician with an M.D. degree and a general medical license for the practice of psychiatry. A psychiatrist who has been trained at a psychoanalytic institute, or who has membership in a psychotherapeutic association, is the most likely to have proficiency in psychotherapy. Neither licensure, American Psychiatric Association membership, nor board certification indicates proficiency as a therapist.

Psychologists receive academic rather than medical training. Psychology is a licensed profession, and the title of psychologist is controlled by state law. Those psychologists with a Ph.D. in clinical or counseling psychology, or the more clinically oriented Psy.D. degree, are the most likely to have proficiency in psychotherapy.

Social workers may be certified or licensed by the state. Training typically consists of a two-year graduate program leading to a master’s in social work (MSW), which may or may not include clinical training. Certification (CSW, ACSW) and licensure (LCSW, LICSW) are earned through supervised postgraduate clinical experience. Membership in the National Association of Social Workers does not ensure psychotherapy skills, while affiliation with a therapy institute or association provides some assurance of proficiency.

Hypnotherapist is the term for people who use hypnosis in a clinical context. One type of hypnotherapist treats behavioral problems such as smoking and obesity, and this can involve only a few sessions of hypnotic work. Hypnosis is used by others in the context of a longer-term therapeutic relationship to help people gain insight, learn new behaviors, and access feelings and memories that have been unconscious. There is no organization that oversees training in and practice of hypnosis, and anyone can use the title of hypnotherapist; however, reputable training programs do require that their students have degrees in professions such as psychology, psychiatry, or social work. These hypnotherapists most often use hypnosis in conjunction with other methods. There are two professional hypnosis societies: The American Society of Clinical Hypnosis and the Society for Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis. Membership in one of these two societies implies that the individual's credentials have been reviewed by the society, and that certain standards of clinical training in hypnosis have been met.

Paraprofessionals. You may encounter paraprofessionals working under the supervision of licensed professionals. Most have college degrees, though not necessarily in a mental health-related discipline. Paraprofessionals receive on-the-job training and are usually closely supervised by professional staff who ensure the quality of services. If a paraprofessional opens an independent therapy practice, there is no guarantee of supervision or quality of services. On the other hand, some paraprofessionals are gifted, empathic healers, who only lack academic psychotherapeutic training.

Alternative healers. Many experiencers have been helped by acupuncturists, massage therapists, breath workers, energy healers, and others who have chosen to pursue alternatives to traditional medicine to express their healing abilities. These healers are often trained at reputable institutes in their chosen professions, and are sometimes able to provide sensitive counseling as well. When dealing with unlicensed clinicians it is important to ask about their training and experience. Reputable professionals would welcome such inquiry.

Licensure

What does it mean for mental health professionals to be licensed? First, it means that they have received a certain level of professional training and supervision in a major mental health discipline. They have demonstrated an acceptable level of professional competence and have passed a national certifying examination in their discipline. Second, they are legally bound to specific standards of professional and ethical practice in their fields. Professional training and licensing offer important protection to the consumer, although they are not a guarantee of competence in therapy.

Finally, if you have health insurance that covers psychotherapy, usually only the services of licensed professionals will be covered. It is important to recognize that health insurance typically covers a very limited number of sessions, and therefore, you may need to pay for part of your treatment on a fee-for-service basis. You may want to inquire as to your practitioner's position on a sliding scale at the onset of treatment, in case you will be paying out of pocket during your therapy.

There are gifted therapists outside the licensed professions. Some people practicing therapy without a license may genuinely feel that licensure and training are inconsistent with their healing philosophies, or may have moved to a new area and need to complete licensure requirements. Licensing also requires the commitment of considerable financial and personal resources which are not available for all therapists immediately after schooling. The cause for concern is therapists who practice without licensure in order to dodge ethical requirements. If you are considering unlicensed therapists, it is useful to learn their reasons for choosing to practice in this way.

FINDING THE RIGHT THERAPIST

Compatibility

There are many different kinds of therapy, and there are many different kinds of therapists. The most important part of the healing process is the relationship between the two of you. Aspects of a good healing relationship include the following:

- The relationship helps you feel more empowered in accomplishing what you want to accomplish;
- The therapist helps you to accept and understand your thoughts and feelings without shame or blame, while helping you to take responsibility for your actions;
- You are able to talk to the therapist about anything in the relationship that is problematic, so that a solution may be found, even if the solution is that the therapist is not the right one for you.

Initial contact by telephone

It is a good idea to plan to have initial conversations with at least three people who in some way meet your broadest qualifications. If you start out with a number of options, you are less likely to feel compelled to pursue a relationship during your first conversation just because you have already spoken with that person. In your initial conversation with a therapist, you will want to find out how she or he responds in three areas: credentials, services, and contractual arrangements.

Credentials. Call to make an initial inquiry with each therapist on your list. When you reach a therapist, explain that you are considering therapy, and want to ask about her professional qualifications before making an appointment. You can eliminate a therapist who refuses to answer or will only provide this information if you make a paid appointment—an expensive way to get public information to which you are entitled. Also, even this brief telephone contact will provide you with some initial sense of what it is like to interact with her, and whether or not you could work with her. Don't dismiss your first impressions.

When discussing credentials, if you are considering a counselor, therapist, or healer outside the licensed professions, there are several questions you should ask. Why has she chosen to forego licensure? What skills and competencies does she have that could be helpful? What kind of training has she had? How much of that was supervised training? Has she graduated from a training program? How much experience has she had? Your intuitive sense of the therapist's integrity is more important than her credentials; your sense of how she handles these basic questions may be more revealing than her actual answers.

Services. If you feel comfortable pursuing the conversation with a therapist further after learning about her credentials, you will want to learn if her services suit your needs. Without going into every detail, let her know what problem or issue you are seeking help with. Would she be interested in discussing this issue with you? Is she accepting new clients? What is her general approach to helping people? Her answers should be something you can understand and relate to.

Contractual arrangements. There are several other things you may want to know about a therapist before scheduling a consultation: How soon can she see you? Would she see you on a regular basis? What hours are available? What is the fee? If you have medical insurance, will your particular policy cover her services?

The office consultation

If you feel comfortable at the end of an initial conversation, make an appointment for an office consultation. Although some therapists do not charge for the first meeting unless you decide to pursue therapy with them, it is customary for a therapist to charge for a consultation, because she or he is providing a professional assessment of your questions and an approach to them.

The consultation is where you will get the most important information you need about a therapist's competence and suitability, and where he will determine whether he can be of help to you. A consultation gives you and the therapist a chance to size each other up, and you should feel free to ask questions. Much of what goes on will happen between the lines: your impressions of each other, your sense of compatibility and rapport, your sense of whether you seem able to communicate and understand each other, whether you agree or disagree on important matters.

By the end of your consultation, you should have covered these important areas: defining your problem and your goals; the therapist's view of your problem; if you have been in therapy before, what worked well, and what did not; how the therapist would work with you; and any further contractual arrangements (including issues of confidentiality, how often you would meet, how long each session would be, when and how you would be expected to pay, and how missed appointments would be handled).

It is also important to ask what the therapist thinks about anomalous experiences. An honest "I don't know what to think" is often a good place to begin. He should know that reports of anomalous experiences may be accompanied by physical manifestations, and that sometimes aspects of the experiences may be supported by bystanders. The extraordinary nature of these experiences should not catch the therapist unawares.

Understanding how he thinks about this issue may influence your decision to work with him.

A single meeting may be enough to obtain the information you need to form a definite impression- especially if your first impression is negative. You may need more than one meeting to feel comfortable deciding to see a particular therapist. Consulting more than once with a therapist before making up your mind is a good practice if you are uncertain after the first meeting; unfortunately, financial limitations do not always make this possible. Addressing the questions on pages one and two will help you make the most of your initial visit. Overall, you should get the impression that this is a warm, empathic, respectful person who is capable of helping you. If you do not feel these qualities, then this is probably not the therapist for you. A therapeutic relationship based on these qualities will help you to enrich your life in just the ways you want most.

SUPPORT FOR THERAPISTS

~~The Program for Extraordinary Experience Research (PEER) offers a Consultation and Referral Network of therapists who are working with experiencers. The network provides referrals for experiencers who are seeking sensitive therapeutic assistance, and also serves as a resource for therapists who would like to consult with colleagues who are doing this work and to be notified of workshops and conferences. If you are seeing a therapist who is interested in joining our network, we would be happy to send a registration form.~~

A FINAL NOTE

Seeking psychotherapeutic help may feel a little overwhelming at first, particularly when there are many pressures on you in your life. You can use this to your advantage, because a person who can help you feel comfortable under these circumstances is likely to be useful to you in the long run. Remember that there are many therapists out there, and you have choice. Choosing someone you feel comfortable discussing difficult issues with is the most important aspect of building a therapeutic relationship. You are the consumer, and the therapist is working for you.