

# How Do People Change?

By Susan Lee Bady, CSW, BCD

How do people change? That is probably the major question therapists are asked and that we ask ourselves daily as we watch and help people go through the amazing process of self exploration and growth.

People seek out therapists for many reasons -- marital problems, lack of assertiveness, depression, anxiety, etc. The underlying goal is always the same, however -- to feel more content with who they are and the way their life is going. The underlying questions are always the same too. Will all this therapy do any good? Can I really change? How do I do it?

It's an important question. Change is easy to talk about and easy to write about. It is only the doing of it that has any real meaning, however.

Therapists know through our daily work that people can really change. Research on psychotherapy outcome backs up our individual experience. The way it happens is very varied, however, because there are so many different methods of psychotherapy and because each person responds differently. There are, however, some general principles about the healing process in psychotherapy that are useful to know.

Whatever form therapy eventually takes, change always begins with the individual's recognition that something is wrong. Sometimes the person has a specific problem in mind. Other times he or she has just a vague sense that things are not quite right. This awareness may be accompanied by a confusion or unhappiness so painful that the person tries to block it out. If, however, you can acknowledge your problems you are ready to move to the next step -- the vision of a better life and, more important, the decision to try and achieve it.

This decision is the most crucial step of the process. It is a move from despair to optimism. It is a statement of self-esteem that your life is valuable, that you deserve happiness and that you have what it takes to get it. There are many different names to this decision -- a sense of volition, an act of will, a statement of hope. Whatever we call it, it is expressed through the action of the person who seeks out therapy and it is the most vital part of the psychotherapy process.

Some people feel it is unnecessary or an admission of weakness to contact a therapist, believing that they should be able to solve their own problems. But most non-medical persons do not expect themselves to extract their own teeth or treat their own heart attacks. Psychic problems can be just as complex as medical ones and need the same degree of skilled help.

Once a person starts therapy the process varies according to the problems, the method of therapy and the personalities of the therapist and client. However, in all cases you form a trusting relationship with your therapist where you feel understood and accepted and which enables you to look at your life patterns and experience ideas and feelings perhaps never shared with another person -- perhaps not even recognized previously by yourself. Sometimes they are things you rather avoid altogether. Yet you can also find a tremendous relief to make important discoveries and to share your thoughts with another. As you continue, you will let go of maladaptive behavior patterns and try out new and better ones. You may make mistakes, experience setbacks and feel confused and upset, but this is a part of the growth. How can anyone change without confusion and mistakes at times?

More often, as you re-affirm your decision to change, you will experience a sense of adventure and excitement as you discover within yourself strengths, talents and possibilities never felt possible before. Your life will continue to have problems -- that is impossible to end. But you will come to view them less as "problems," and more as opportunities for growth and your daily activities will become more enjoyable as new worlds open up in work, personal relationships, and general satisfaction.

*The Park Slope Shopper, 1987.*