

Adjusting Your Expectations

Getting the most from your time in a therapeutic setting

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Lets face it... It is a difficult thing to consider leaving your comfort zone. It is more than just the routine of your life, sometimes more than speaking with a helping professional about some relationship difficulties, and in some cases, it means flying out of state to live in a therapeutic residential environment for a period of time. For the average person to even consider any of those steps, it would require a few things: emotional pain, resources, time, willingness, motivation, courage to lean into psychological discomfort, and of course, the urgent knowledge of knowing that if you do not make some changes, you are going to lose something very precious to you. This fear bestows the unintended gift of perspective, or a moment of clarity in which you suddenly see what really matters. This perspective is power.

Like many people coming into treatment for the first time, you will most likely look at various treatment centers websites, read previous clients' reviews and comments, compare what type of amenities they offer, you will look pictures of their housing you would be staying in, and evaluate what programs and modalities any given treatment center offers. These images can sway decisions in a very positive or very negative way. More importantly, walking into a treatment facility or a professional therapists' office for the first time with *the right mindset and realistic expectations* can make all the difference for your experience and outcome.

What does the ideal mindset and realistic expectations look like for those who get the most out of treatment? To answer that, we will evaluate two things, human growth and development and your motivation.

Human growth is an incredible, multi-faceted process of discovering self, the world, and the natural process of relating to others. During your early developmental years, you brain had undergone a process called pruning. This systemic procedure is designed to promote one thing: human survival. In other

words, your brain will adapt to any given environment, regardless if that environment was loving, safe, and nurturing or the opposite, unsafe, abusive, and relationally disabling. Why does this impact my outcome in treatment you ask? It matters because human beings will recreate their family of origin dynamics everywhere they go. So to be practical for a moment... say you never felt parents or authority figures were safe and you typically resisted or deflected anything they asked you to do. Going into treatment environment for the first time, you may easily (and unconsciously) find yourself deflecting someone trying to establish a therapeutic relationship with you, or find yourself finding all the faults with the environment as a means to justify why therapy is not working. What if you never felt your early environment allowed you to have a voice, or you learned to walk on eggshells to keep false peace? Imagine how you could really need something in a treatment center or talk about something painful and overwhelming, but never want to be a burden and ask for help, because you feel you do not deserve it.

Motivation is indeed a valuable commodity, particularly because you will need to go against the grain of your mental and relational habits. Many people going into treatment for substance and process addictions (eating disorder, love and sex, codependency, etc.) do so to prevent the loss of relationship, a job, their life, and sometimes as a substitute to jail time. If you are going into treatment to abstain from an addiction, there is very healthy fear that will benefit you, and there is a very unhealthy fear that will undermine your endeavors in the long run. A healthy fear of separation and loss from family can move you some to get help and learn much needed skill deficits; an unhealthy fear of separation and loss could fuel "wearing a mask" and saying all the right things, but not actually pushing into the emotional discomfort needed to understand and process your unhealthy fear of abandonment that continually makes you fearful, anxious, codependent, people

pleasing, resentful, depressed, passive-aggressive, and never really able to be true to yourself. Whether someone completes 30 or 60 days in treatment, if they have not worked through those underlying issues and skill deficits, it poses a very legitimate question of “was my time in treatment really for my betterment or to make others happy?”

As a helping professional working the dual diagnosis industry, some of the clients I have worked with in the past who I think had the ideal mindset that gleaned the most out of treatment had these following attributes in common: teachability, courage, willingness to lean into emotional discomfort, and most of all, the commitment to let themselves be human, or in other words, learn to be emotionally vulnerable.

Realistic expectations help profoundly to prevent disappointment. Keep this in mind as you consider which treatment center is right for you; it will take time to adjust to any new environment, especially one with constant transition of new peers coming and going, a new schedule, new diet, new rules, new authority figures, and all of this adjustment is happening in a therapeutic setting. Therapy is like a bank account; your return depends on your investment. If you are expecting amazing results and feeling better without any work on your part, that is not realistic and it is the epitome of magical thinking.

Accepting reality is the foundation for emotional stability. When you are preparing to enter treatment, make sure you do your homework and get an idea of what the weekly and daily schedules look like. If certain modalities (like CBT, DBT, Family Systems, Trauma, etc.) are important to you, make sure those are offered at any facility and inquire how often you should expect to receive those services. There is great value in doing research on therapeutic staff you may be working with, see what modality they use in therapy.

Realistic expectations will make your transition much smoother and help curb frustration. And yes, there will be frustration. If you put two people in a room for a given amount of time, conflict on some level is inevitable. Imagine anywhere from 10 to 150 people in emotional pain sharing the same place for 30+ days.

Amenities are relevant, but your priority should always be on the therapeutic relationship with your helping professional. I am convinced that a facility is just a building with 4 walls, but 90% of your actual work dealing with emotional pain and the quality of your experience in treatment is linked to the relational safety and rapport you have with your therapist.

Conclusively, be mindful of how you relate to others now, because if it goes unidentified, it could undermine your shot in treatment. Be honest with yourself about what motivates you. Be patient when you begin therapy, even if you do not totally agree with what the therapist is focusing on, he may be onto something that could change your life.

Relationships, money, jobs, opportunities, friends, and material things can ebb and flow throughout the course of your life, however the one resource you will never get back is time. Make the most of it.