

## **It's Not You, It's Me: What Makes a Good Therapist**

*by Sara Gershen, LCSW, August 27, 2016*

I always ask new clients at the start of treatment if they have had experience with therapy before and if it was helpful. For those who have experience with therapy, more often than not they report that it was either not helpful or the benefits were not long lasting. When asked what did not work the frequent response is, "I just didn't click with the therapist." Conversely, when I speak to my colleagues about their work or we consult on difficult cases, we tend to put the responsibility back on the client. We have a variety of reasons for why the client is not improving, such as environmental factors (e.g., family and work stress), the specific diagnosis (usually a personality disorder) is impeding progress, or that the client is not yet motivated enough. This therefore begs the question, is it the client or the therapist?

### **Untangling the Questions at TUBHC-M**

At TUBHC-M, we have an ongoing project to try to untangle and provide some clear answers to these questions. We see two main situations at the clinic where clients do not appear to improve. The first situation is the client who comes for several sessions but then never comes back (what the profession calls a "drop out"). We never know why these clients drop out because they do not tell us, but it is likely because either they "just didn't click with the therapist" or they liked the therapist personally but felt the therapist was not helping them.

A second situation is the client who comes for many sessions but never seems to get much better. We can probably assume that they did "click" in these situations, and the problem is that either the therapist is bad at his or her job or the client simply has an intractable problem no matter who treats them.

### **Is It the Client or the Therapist?**

Research has shown that psychotherapy is effective in treating a wide range of psychiatric disorders. There are numerous evidence-based treatments that reduce problems and improve quality of life. However, research and experience also show that sometimes the process is as important as the content of psychotherapy; meaning that the relationship between the therapist and the client has an impact on success. There has been less research dedicated to what makes some therapists more effective at building these relationships with clients and seeing success than others.

One characteristic that seems to be crucial to being a good therapist is **interpersonal skill**. Therapy is all about communication, both verbal and non-verbal. Carl Rogers' humanistic approach to therapy supports this idea and has had a wide influence. Rogers defined three conditions necessary for the helping relationship: empathy, unconditional positive regard, and congruence. In other words, a therapist should convey through both words and actions that he or she understands the client's feelings, cares about the client's well-being, and is authentic or genuine in approach to the relationship. With these three skills in place a good therapist should also be able to form a positive alliance with all clients regardless of gender, background, sexuality, or diagnosis.

Many individuals enter into therapy somewhat apprehensive about the process and whether or not they will see improvement. A therapist should therefore be able to demonstrate their own confidence in their skills as well as confidence in the therapeutic process. A good therapist has the ability to effectively communicate what treatment will look like for the client, which should include a clear, measurable treatment plan. The therapist and client should develop the treatment plan together, with the client empowered to set and achieve goals and objectives. Additionally, it is extremely helpful for the therapist to document and communicate the client's progress and success by using regular outcome measures and observations.

The reasons why an individual enters therapy are varied and personal. Every client may not be looking for the same things in his or her therapist. However, there do seem to be some universal traits that good therapists possess. Mental health professionals owe it to our clients to be the best at what we do and to do the research that informs our future practice.

At TUBHC-M, we understand that psychotherapy is a two-way street. We are committed to making ourselves better to help make you better.