

A practitioner's definition of psychotherapy

With so many different types of psychotherapy currently used in practice, an acceptable working definition of psychotherapy must necessarily be broad. The very act of establishing a meaningful definition may reveal something of not only the nature but the process of psychotherapy. The following definition is offered as a starting point:

“Psychotherapy is a primarily interpersonal treatment that is based on psychological principles and involves a trained therapist and a client who has a mental disorder, problem, or complaint; and it is adapted or individualized for the particular client and his or her disorder, problem or complaint.” (Wampold, 2001, p.3). With both medical practitioners and psychotherapists using “therapy” to describe their treatments, many psychotherapy clients assume that psychotherapy follows the simple medical model of assessment, diagnosis, and treatment applied by the practitioner, leading to symptom relief in the patient. Yet there is a fundamental difference between medical therapy and psychological therapy. In essence, it is that while medical therapy is done “by” the active, expert medical practitioner “to” the passive and non-expert patient, psychotherapy entails a “therapeutic relationship” between therapist and client, in which the client, with whom the therapist must collaborate in order to proceed, is necessarily an active participant. For the purpose of argument, the attributes of psychotherapy are further articulated as follows:

Psychotherapy is:

- An interactive process involving the active participation of a therapist and a client, typically involving a ‘therapeutic’ relationship;
- Primarily intended to facilitate an adaptation (e.g. in behaviour, perception, attitudes, beliefs and/or emotional responses) in the client, either to bring about or to respond to, a change in their life circumstances. To the extent that the

changed circumstances are to endure, then these adaptations must also be enduring;

- Tailored to the client's need, personality and intellectual/emotional/communicative capacities to some degree;

Psychotherapy is not:

- Done "to" the client "by" the therapist;
- All that is required to bring about enduring change in the individual (ongoing individual work is also required on the client's part between and after sessions).

Psychotherapy is thus unique among health treatment interventions, both for the central participatory role required of the client, and for the requirement that some or all elements of treatment continue to be employed by the client after formal treatment is ended. Successful therapy therefore is a faithful rendering of all of the above, resulting in lasting change(s) in the client, in areas consistent with the client's desires at the outset.