

What Is Effective Psychotherapy?

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Much of psychotherapy is typically directed at helping people reduce their stress and better manage any symptoms, such as anxiety and depression, that they might be experiencing. While effective stress and symptom management are certainly central features of psychotherapy, they are most often accompanied and sustained by improved psychological functioning (Hersen & Sleder, 2002). This article discusses the particular areas of improved psychological functioning that are typically associated with successful psychotherapy.

Chui et al. (2020) created the Complementary Measure of Psychotherapy Outcome (COMPO) scale to assess the different areas of improved psychological functioning that both mental health providers and clients found to be essential for therapeutic success. The scale itself assesses two broad domains of therapeutic focus: functioning within oneself and functioning in relationships. These two areas of functioning are broken down into the following sub-domains: improved interpersonal relationships, enhanced self-understanding, greater self-acceptance, increased capacity for self-direction as well as more confidence in being true to oneself and becoming more adept at balancing competing life priorities.

As part of this research, three investigations were conducted to determine what psychological outcomes were the most typically associated with successful psychotherapy. Graduate students, early career psychologists, and experienced therapists were the initial subjects for these investigations. These efforts were aimed identifying the most common psychological factors associated with successful therapeutic intervention and then developing reliable rating scales to assess the degree to which these different factors affected successful outcomes.

To further refine and validate the different scale measures, COMPO was administered to people currently in psychotherapy, adults in the community, people who had experience with psychotherapy, and prospective clients. Finally, psychotherapy clients with depression, including twenty women in their mid-30s at an outpatient clinic, were rated with the COMPO over the course of treatment to evaluate this assessment measure in a real-world setting.

Therapeutic Success

In addition to symptom relief, four core factors in this research emerged as the most important psychological contributors to therapeutic success. These four essential outcomes are as follows:

1. **Self-Knowledge.** This characteristic, also known as self-understanding, is realized in those people who enjoy a clear and well-balanced view of themselves and their life circumstances. They are aware of the different perspectives and feelings of others in any given situation, as well as understanding how their own personality and limitations affect their perceptions. Expansion of accurate self-understanding, grounded in self-acceptance, is one of the hallmarks of effective psychotherapy.

2. **Self-Acceptance.** Self-acceptance is the affirmation of both one's personal strengths and weaknesses. This characteristic involves acknowledging the inherent core value of oneself despite an awareness of one's limitations. Most importantly, it is the ability to see oneself as worthwhile despite one's flaws. When effective, psychotherapy often reduces critical self-talk and expands grounded self-affirmation.
3. **Relationship Quality.** People who feel understood and supported by the important people in their lives experience more fulfilling interpersonal relationships. During and after therapy, these clients typically experience improvements in their interpersonal relationships and derive greater satisfaction and support from them. This is yet another marker of successful psychotherapy.
4. **Consideration of Others.** This characteristic includes empathy wherein people are able to express understanding and have compassion for others' feelings and perspectives. Prior research (Fonagy & Target, 2006) has identified "mentalization" as a key psychological component of being considerate. This characteristic involves the capacity to make sense of one's own inner reality while showing an understanding of the validity of others' perspectives without necessarily agreeing with how they see things.

Research Findings

Research shows that when psychotherapy focuses on both managing symptoms and facilitating these four key areas of psychological functioning, the likelihood of successful therapeutic outcomes are high (Chui, 2020). Moreover, assuming there is adequate support and reflection provided by the therapist, most psychotherapy of any kind tends to work best when collaborative efforts are directed toward these key levers of change (Klein & Elliott, 2006). There is also research suggesting that psychotherapy incorporating these four areas can help reverse some of the debilitating mood and behavioral consequences associated with trauma (Perry & Winfrey, 2021). Finally, there is empirical evidence suggesting that even personality traits, which are less subject to change, can be successfully modified when the therapeutic process focuses on these core areas of psychological functioning (Waldron et al., 2011).

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