- Occupational therapy



Take the TABOO *away from* THERAPY

Going through tough times? Getting help can have meaningful impact on your mental wellbeing, says Ali Horsfall

When you're facing challenges and low points in life, what are you most likely to do? Keep calm and carry on – ignoring or burying your problems? Vent to family and friends? Or hold the weight of the world on your shoulders while you struggle to cope?

If you tend to keep your troubles to yourself, you're not alone – nearly two-thirds of Brits* put on a 'brave face' to avoid talking about their mental health. Yet seeking the right support can make a big difference if your thoughts and feelings are negatively affecting your daily life. Over 70% of people who've had counselling for their difficulties say that they have found it helpful**.

My experience of sitting on a therapist's sofa is entirely positive. In fact, I would go as far as saying I *love* therapy, and have leant on it when life has felt tricky, tangled or I can't see the light at the end of the tunnel. Dipping in and out of sessions for decades, it's something that has helped me navigate the twists and turns of my 20s, 30s and 40s. I've gained a greater understanding of myself and it's allowed me to reflect on my actions, behaviour and choices – the good and not so great – so I can move forward in life, feeling more comfortable in my own skin.

Over the years, I've seen male therapists, female ones, had therapy on my own and couple's counselling too. All helpful. All interesting. I've benefited from free sessions and have paid for them privately, even at times when it's busted my budget. I know now that setting my world straight in therapy is way more

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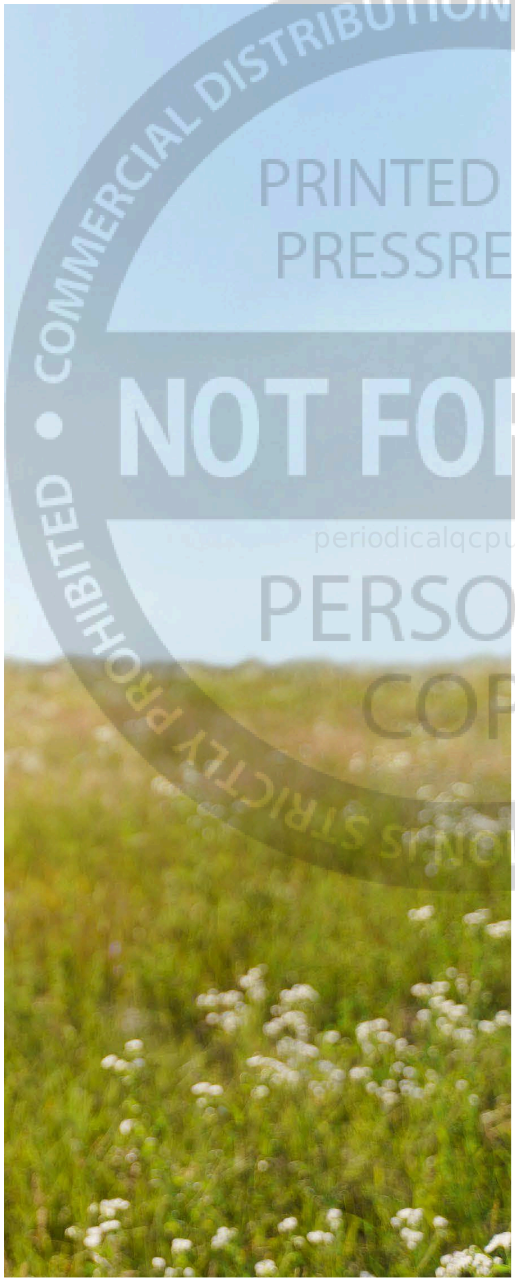

beneficial for my wellbeing than an expensive facial or relaxing minibreak.

Taking care of the mind

Wondering what it could do for you? Therapy can benefit everyone, says psychotherapist Joshua Fletcher, author of *And How Does That Make You Feel?* (£10.99, PB, Orion Spring). 'It's a big myth that you only need to see a therapist when you're at rock bottom. You can get help any time – whether it's for minor stress, if you're feeling a bit lost or have started to experience anxiety during the perimenopause or menopause,' explains Joshua. 'Going to therapy is a compassionate thing to do for yourself. Even if you're not in crisis, it's preventative – you're looking after your mind. It can help you see things from different perspectives and allows you to address your internal voices that may have got in the way of you enjoying life.'

Smash the stigma

There's no doubt that both the popularity and the need for therapy or counselling is increasing in the UK. One in six people report experiencing a common mental health problem, such as anxiety and depression, in any given week, according to Mind. Other research reveals less than half of the nation feels optimistic about the future.

However, we haven't yet fully normalised having therapy, unlike in the US, where there's no shame or stigma attached and it's as common as going to a dentist, says Joshua. In part, this could be because we're more emotionally conservative as a culture – think of the British stiff upper lip, or the notion you have to just 'get on with it'. Sharing your inner world with a therapist, or admitting to others that you do, can be daunting – it isn't easy to be vulnerable, after all, especially if you pride yourself on taking care of others and are usually the one steering the ship through turbulent waters.

The culture within your family can play a part too, says Joshua. 'If you grew up in an environment where certain topics were off limits, or your emotions were something to be hidden, then you may feel shame when experiencing vulnerability.'

I've learnt that a good therapist will make you feel comfortable and safe so you can truly open up and get the benefits. Having a space where you're able to feel all of your feelings can be liberating and freeing – once you get a taste of that, your sessions become almost sacred. A time for you, and a way to release any negativity you're carrying.

IN DISTRESS?

If you need help now, the Samaritans are on hand to listen without judgement. Call them any time, from any phone, on 116 123.

Make sense of what's going on in your world

If you're lucky to have a tight-knit, supportive family and ride-or-die friends, you may question if therapy is worth the bother or the expense. Why not just chew over your problems with your most empathic pals and a bottle of good pinot grigio? 'A therapist has a neutral perspective,' says Joshua. 'So while your loved ones want you to feel better, sometimes, therapy isn't about immediately feeling OK. It can often be about getting better at experiencing emotions you don't like, in order to teach the brain that it's OK to have them.'

Friendships and relationships with family can also be conditional even if we can't see it, he explains. 'A therapist's job is to be unconditional, so you can bring any issue to therapy and it is treated without judgement. A lot of the magic is simply being listened to. It's very powerful to have your voice heard – to be able to get your thoughts out of your head, knowing that everything that you've always wanted to say stays in that room, protected by confidentiality.'

NEED TO TALK?

If you are struggling with any of these emotional difficulties, therapy may be beneficial.

- ☐ Depression/low mood/ sadness
- ☐ Unresolved trauma
- ☐ Grief and loss
- ☐ Feelings of anger
- ☐ Low self-esteem
- ☐ Intrusive thoughts
- ☐ Anxiousness
- ☐ Relationship problems
- ☐ Phobias

TURN OVER FOR MORE EXPERT TIPS THAT CAN HELP >>

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FINDING YOUR WAY

Make therapy work for you with our expert advice on navigating the process.



1

DO YOUR HOMEWORK

You wouldn't buy a fridge without research – choosing a therapist is no different. However, 'therapist' is not a protected term under UK law, which means anyone can call themselves a psychotherapist, hypnotherapist or counsellor, and offer their services without proper training. Whether you get a recommendation from a friend or Google, read reviews and ensure they are registered with a regulatory body, such as the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy. Visit bacp.co.uk and search the directory.

2

EXPLORE OPTIONS

It may be helpful to choose a therapist to match your needs. If you're grieving, bereavement counselling may be the best fit; cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) can help you manage a phobia; or if you're experiencing marriage difficulties, you could explore couple's therapy. Whatever the approach, the overarching goal is to address any issues and facilitate positive change. 'The focus is on examining problems from their source, seeing how old internal patterns relate to your current situation and helping you heal,' says clinical psychologist Dr Jenna Vyas-Lee (koveminds.com).

3

SCHEDULE APPOINTMENTS

Use a therapist's initial consultation to get a feel for what they offer and how to progress. Short on time? 'Many people worry that sessions won't fit with their busy lifestyles,' says Dr Vyas-Lee. While consistency is key, therapy shouldn't cause additional stress, so organise it to suit your needs. This could mean having online appointments or seeing your therapist twice a month, rather than weekly. Avoid rushing to something straight after, as you may need time to process everything.

4

LISTEN TO YOUR INTUITION

You'll be sharing your innermost thoughts, fears and desires with your therapist, so establishing trust, good communication and a sense of rapport is key. 'Most people can tell within the first couple of sessions if the chemistry is right,' says Dr Vyas-Lee. Not feeling fully supported or understood by your therapist? This might mean it's not the right match – and it's OK to switch. 'If it's not working, it's important to address it and move on with someone else,' adds Dr Vyas-Lee.

5

GO WITH THE FLOW

It's likely you'll laugh, cry and experience every emotion in between during the process. This may feel uncomfortable at times, especially if you're not used to revealing your raw feelings to others, but don't feel you have to minimise your problems or apologise to your therapist for showing emotion. 'All struggles are entirely valid,' says Dr Vyas-Lee. 'No matter how big or small they may feel to you, therapy is likely to benefit you in improving things.'



ACCESS FREE SUPPORT

If you are registered with a GP, you can access the NHS Talking Therapies services by self-referral. The service offers CBT, counselling and guided self-help for mental health problems.

PHOTOS AND ILLUSTRATIONS: GETTY. *MIND. **BACP PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS SURVEY. IF YOU HAVE CONCERNS ABOUT YOUR HEALTH, SEE YOUR GP

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