

## Why Therapy? Exploring the Strengths of Seeking Help

Long before there were therapists, there were family members. Grandpa and Aunt Jane listened, or gave us advice, or sometimes just told us to buck up. If family couldn't help, there were friends or a clergy member. But most likely, we were also warned not to broadcast our troubles, and many people suffered their mental problems silently.

Times change, and so has society's acceptance of seeking help. The old stigma of being seen as weak or incapable is largely gone, helped by many well-known writers, actors and politicians being open about their struggles with, and treatments for, everything from depression to chronic shoplifting. Going to a therapist is now seen as a positive step in most people's lives.

"Therapy is a unique relationship and what makes it valuable sets it apart from friendships, working partnerships, family connections and love affairs," says Carl Sherman, author of *How to Go to Therapy: Making the Most of Professional Help*.

In his book, Sherman describes therapy as a balance in which two people are "collaborating on a single project: helping you deal with your problems and achieve the change you want. There is no other agenda."

It's the simplicity of that agenda, combined with a structured schedule, confidentiality and trust, that make this unique relationship work so well for so many people. Rather than proof that someone is "sick," it is a sign of good health to make a commitment to change.

Some people still believe a therapist will make them lie on a couch. While some therapists might have couches in their offices, you choose where to sit. You choose what to say. You choose when to say it.

And, nowadays, there is an incredible number of ways to explore problems. Beyond conventional talk therapy, there is art therapy, music therapy, somatic therapy—even laughter therapy—to name just a few. For every kind of problem, and every kind of person, there is a therapeutic healing modality that fits.

The strength of therapy is that there are no strings attached. In his book, Sherman offers some further benefits of the therapeutic relationship:

1. **Safety.** If the relationship is right, you can feel safe to reveal your fears, dreams and fantasies without fear of repercussions or judgment on the part of the therapist. Unlike telling a friend or family member, your words to a therapist won't come back to haunt you.

2. **Confidentiality.** The therapist is bound by ethics and law (except in a few well-defined cases) not to reveal what you have said during sessions. This adds to the feeling of safety and trust, and aids in people making changes.

3. **Learning.** Therapy can be seen as a deeply educational experience, in which a therapist acts like a coach or teacher to help the client see the world—inner and outer—in new and positive ways.

Into each life some rain must fall, and we all have felt deluged at least once in our lives. Grief, loss, anger, financial hardship, relationship problems, stress—all of these are a normal part of life. So is seeking help when coping is just too hard. It's also normal to be a little afraid of what friends and family might say about seeing a therapist. But, in the end, it's your life, and you know best how to make it a richer, happier and more fulfilling one—with a little help. \*

## 10 Actions of True Intimacy

The poet Rilke once advised a friend that partners in a good marriage should appoint the other "guardian of his solitude." Rilke's comments, applicable to all committed relationships, point to the mutual respect and clarity that form the basis for genuine intimacy. Here are 10 ways to deepen your intimacy.

1. **Bring up** difficult subjects.
2. **Listen** with openness to feedback.
3. **Elicit** a fuller range of feelings during discussions and disagreements.
4. **Respect** your partner's desire for greater distance as expressing a need for comfort—not a personal rejection.
5. **Listen** without comment during disagreements, despite strong feelings being stirred.
6. **Maintain** perspective. Your partner is a human, not deity or demon.
7. **Be honest** with yourself. Without that, true intimacy with another can't really happen.
8. **Dare** to expose your imperfections and fears. (See vulnerability article on page 3.)
9. **Avoid** depending on your partner to fulfill all your needs.
10. **Don't use** affection, sex and loving behavior to reward or punish.

Rilke reminds us of the connection between intimacy and a healthy ability to maintain what's separate: "Once the realization is accepted that even between the closest human beings, an infinite distance continues to exist, a wonderful living side-by-side can grow up, if they succeed in loving the distance between them which makes it possible to see each other whole and against a wide sky!" \*

# A Letter From

Bradley Brenner, PhD



As an instructor and supervisor of therapists-in-training, I often discuss with trainees what contributes to effective therapy. One major contributor, in my opinion, is creating an environment that allows for openness, honesty and vulnerability. As a therapist, I diligently strive to create this type of environment and am always impressed by the strength people call upon to engage in therapy.

Having seen the benefits of allowing for vulnerability in a therapeutic situation, I often piece together with clients how in other situations — such as at work, or with friends, family or romantic partners — we are often protective of ourselves because those situations make it more difficult to be open.

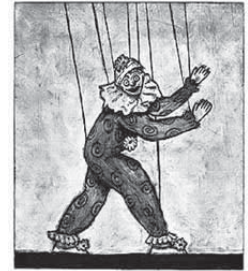
As you will read in this issue of *Thriving*, we sometimes shut down and instead create emotional walls that were originally designed to protect. Unfortunately, walls such as those often outlive their usefulness. In my view, it is important to occasionally re-evaluate how some protective mechanisms may no longer be serving our best interests.

Although sometimes difficult to identify, these attempts at keeping us safe may take the form of disengagement, becoming excessively controlling to minimize risk or learning to shy away from true intimacy. In particular, it is exceedingly difficult to be open and trusting after having been betrayed, as you will read on the back page.

Please feel free to contact me if you would like to discuss anything further. I am here to help you address the challenges of work and life.

## How Controlling Are You?

We all know them...the folks who **MUST CONTROL EVERYTHING**. Perhaps it's the mother-in-law who you secretly call "Controller of the Universe," or the boss at work who has to have a hand in every little detail of your work, or the parent who directs every aspect of their child's life. However well-meaning controlling people might be, their actions often result in alienation, resentment and a lack of intimacy with loved ones. When they have a choice, people don't usually like to be around controlling individuals. Take this quiz to see how controlling you might be.



### True False Set 1

- 1. I discourage the people around me from expressing anger, fear or sadness.
- 2. I know what's best for others; that's why they should listen to what I have to say. I'm only trying to help them.
- 3. I'd rather do most things myself.
- 4. When people go against my suggestions, I tend to withdraw my affection; when they do what I say, I'll lavish the praise.
- 5. I take it as disloyalty or personal rejection when others act or feel differently than I do.
- 6. When I'm in a relationship, I want to know where my significant other is all the time.
- 7. I am easily irritated, especially by others' incompetence or rebelliousness.
- 8. When watching television with others, I have to have the remote. Similarly, when in a car with others, I feel uncomfortable unless I'm the driver.

### Set 2

- 1. I encourage others to express their true feelings around me.
- 2. I would rather people be themselves than try to please me, and that they do things out of choice, not obligation.
- 3. It doesn't bother me when others question or disagree with me. In fact, I enjoy a lively debate.
- 4. I steer clear of micromanaging family members or employees, and instead encourage independence and independent thinking.
- 5. I choose not to focus on power, prestige or perfection; I hold others to be the best they can be—and true to themselves.
- 6. I find it easy to relax, laugh or be spontaneous.
- 7. I value stability and consistency, and don't get caught up in chaos and drama.
- 8. Getting someone to do something by yelling at them isn't something that works for me.

If you answered true more often in Set 1 and false more often in Set 2, you may wish to examine where your urge to control is coming from. Most often, fear is the deep culprit. Learning how to approach and handle fear in a positive manner helps us accept others—and ourselves—better. And doing so sets us up for better relationships, better health and better self-esteem. Please don't hesitate to call if you'd like to explore this issue in your life. \*

# What Does It Mean to Be Vulnerable? (And Why Is It Empowering?)

Leslie is terrified of getting older, of her children leaving home, of being alone. These feelings scare her so much, she invents ways not to face her fears. Mostly, she lashes out at others for “making” her feel bad. She wonders why she has so few friends and can’t find a mate.

Tom doesn’t walk, he swaggers. He doesn’t talk, he commands. When his children and friends head for the exit, he figures they just don’t have the guts to handle such a big man. But he has an ulcer and he can’t sleep. Lately, he’s been having nightmares about being trapped. Deep, deep down, he’s afraid he’s really a little man after all.

## Vulnerability Is Not About Being Weak

It hurts to admit we are vulnerable. For so many of us, it means we are weak, helpless and open to attack by others or by whatever life throws at us. Our culture demands that we be strong, so we try our best to hide our fears and cover up our weak spots. We don’t want to be seen as failures.

But there can be beauty in vulnerability and value in exploring so-called weaknesses. By exploring our “dark” side, we can turn our fears and vulnerabilities into strengths. To paraphrase author Matthew Fox, “Our demons aren’t *in* the way; they *are* the way!”

Often, we believe that keeping a stiff upper lip will keep us strong. We hold a tight lid on our fears and pain, but in doing so, we also cover up and lose touch with our feelings. This, in turn, shields our hearts and separates us from our connection to humanity.

Instead, imagine the worst thing that can happen and explore your fears. It is often helpful to work with a therapist to face what it is you

believe you are defending yourself against, and then to help you understand, accept and let go. This is a journey that can be long and difficult, but it’s only by facing our vulnerable places—not covering them up or running from them—that we come out the other side.



## Vulnerability Is Empowering

Being vulnerable actually empowers us. We all have a wound, and when we allow ourselves to be vulnerable, we accept that wound and then we can move forward. Our wound is our blessing.

Being vulnerable hasn’t been very popular in our society, but this is changing. Words such as “humility” and “gratitude” and “forgiveness” are being used more frequently. They are terms that show a cultural shift towards accepting all human traits, negative and positive, strong and weak.

Author and therapist Beth Miller takes this one step further. In her book, *Resilience: 12 Qualities to Cultivate*, she calls vulnerability “falling apart” and urges that “it is time to bring falling apart into fashion.”

Being a student of life means being vulnerable—open to life, to learning, to experiences, to yourself and to emotions. Most of all, it means being willing to accept things as they are.

Being vulnerable comes easier to some than others. Here are some ways to explore being vulnerable:

- Be honest with yourself.
- Look for deeper reasons or motives for your own behavior. Take responsibility for your behavior.
- Take a risk. Start by letting someone you trust know your weak places.
- Be willing to listen to honest feedback.
- Accept the fact that you have anger, and find words to talk about it.
- Let go of guilt and resentment. The past is past. Make amends if needed.
- Accept that you make mistakes. That’s part of being human. \*



# Learning to Trust After Betrayal



A man finds out his business partner has been using the company's profits to fund a gambling addiction.

A woman learns her sister has hidden assets from their parents' estate.

A husband discovers his wife has been having an affair with his friend.

Whether it's by a sibling, colleague, spouse or other close individual, betrayal slices through us like nothing else. It shatters close bonds, destroys self-esteem and breeds insecurity. It's almost guaranteed to cause pain, heartache, shock and fury.

But it's possible to mend the wounds of betrayal. It's possible to conquer rage and regain dignity. Most of all, it's possible to trust again.

To get through betrayal, it's helpful to have a roadmap—a plan, if you will—for what to expect and what you might want to consider. Here are some ideas, followed by a list of books that can help with the process.

**Get support.** Sharing your feelings helps to release the pain. Consider whether you will be best served by support from your family, friends, therapist or a supportive group.

**Consider when/if/how to confront.** Thinking this through in ad-

vance and acting with intention can positively affect the entire healing process. Also consider how or whether to talk to children about what has happened.

**Weigh your options.** You could seek revenge, hold on to outrage and resentment, forget about the transgression or forgive. The choice is yours. What do each of these options hold for you?

**Examine why the person betrayed you and what makes you vulnerable to betrayal.** Confronting the reasons behind betrayal requires a commitment to self-examination and mutual examination of the relationship itself. Doing so, while difficult, can create a stronger relationship than existed before the betrayal.

**Rebuild your self-image.** The journey back to trust also includes reconciliation with yourself, so that you can trust yourself again. Start by banishing self-blame; change the negative statements about yourself to self-loving statements. For example: "I am whole. I am a devoted friend/spouse/sibling. I am loved from the inside out." Write lists of your positive

qualities to keep perspective.

Trust is the cornerstone of all relationships. Moving past the trauma of broken trust can mean moving into a new realm of intimacy with ourselves and with others.

## Some Helpful Books

*How Could You Do This to Me?: Learning to Trust After Betrayal*, by Jane Greer and Margery D. Rose

*Not "Just Friends": Rebuilding Trust and Recovering Your Sanity*, by Shirley P. Glass

*Back from Betrayal: Saving a Marriage, a Family, a Life*, by Suzy Farbman

*After the Affair: Overcoming the Pain and Rebuilding Trust*, by Janis Abrahms Spring and Michael Spring

*Betrayed!: How You Can Restore Sexual Trust and Rebuild Your Life*, by Riki Robbins \*

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