

What happens when therapy goes wrong?

Client information

Kathleen Daymond and Sarah Millward from our Ask Kathleen service explain what you can do if you have concerns about your therapy or your therapist.

We use the word 'therapy' to cover talking therapies, such as counselling, psychotherapy and coaching, and 'therapist' to include 'counsellor' and 'psychotherapist'.

You probably started therapy expecting to feel better, so it can be worrying if you find it's making you feel unsure or upset.

Therapy can be stressful, so it's quite normal to occasionally feel uncomfortable during the process. But sometimes therapists can get things wrong.

If something happens during therapy that you find unsettling or confusing, you should discuss your concerns with your therapist. This is important if your therapy is to be useful.

You may find it hard to tell your therapist 'You're not helping me', 'I felt bothered by...' or to explain why you're feeling unhappy.

Your therapist may seem a powerful person and you might be worried about their reaction to critical comments. Or, if you're finding the therapy useful, you may not want to raise the issue in case it spoils your good relationship.

Therapists can often sense when clients have issues but they're not mind readers. A good therapist will welcome your feedback. They should listen and work with you to understand what took place, or explain why they acted in a certain way, so that you can achieve a better outcome from your therapy.

Key points

If you're not happy with your therapy, it's important to:

- accept your uncomfortable feelings
- think about what has caused them
- discuss them with your therapist

Thinking about the issue

Think carefully about why you're feeling uncomfortable with your therapy. For example, your concerns might include:

Concerns about practical issues

- My therapist agreed to see me on reduced fees but now she wants to increase her charges and I can't afford it.
- My therapist keeps changing the time of my appointment at short notice.
- My therapist has suggested we meet at his home rather than my GP's surgery where we started and I don't feel comfortable with it.
- My therapist says she can't carry on working with me because she's got a full time job. I feel she's dumping me.

Concerns about the process

- My therapist often doesn't say anything and waits for me to speak. The long silences make me feel uncomfortable.
- I keep asking my therapist what I should do but he won't give me any advice. I expected to be given more help making decisions.
- My therapist often talks about herself in sessions. I feel annoyed because sometimes the sessions are more about her than me.
- I feel very uncomfortable because my counsellor takes notes during our sessions.

Concerns over the relationship

- I've found out that my therapist is a trainee and I think he should have told me at the start. I worry about whether he's good enough.
- I would feel better if my therapist would give me a hug sometimes but she won't.
- My therapist said I could ring him whenever I needed to but now he's told me to stop and I don't know why.

I met my therapist socially and was disturbed by some of the things she said about herself. I can't relate to her in the same way anymore.

Sometimes even small things such as the way the therapist spoke, the particular words they used, their tone of voice or facial expression can be unsettling.

Be clear about what your concerns are before discussing them with your therapist. You might find talking to a trusted friend or writing down what happened can help to clarify your thoughts and feelings.

Talking to your therapist

It's best to tell your therapist what is wrong as soon as you can.

Many therapists will invite you to give regular feedback during your sessions about what aspects of your therapy have been helpful and what have not. This can help you deal with issues as they arise. If they don't offer time for this, you should feel free to raise any concerns in your next session.

Sometimes it's easier to say things about problems in a relationship when there is some distance between you, so if you feel uncomfortable discussing it face-to-face you could email, telephone or write them a letter.

Key points

- you should raise any concerns you have with your therapist
- be open and give honest feedback about how you experience your therapy
- tell your therapist what is and what is not helpful
- don't be afraid to raise concerns about practical matters such as fee increases or changes to appointment times

Taking it further

If you've tried talking to your therapist and their response was unhelpful, or if you have serious concerns about your therapist's competence, think carefully about what you want to happen next.

Do you want an apology, an acknowledgement of what happened and a guarantee that it won't happen again? Or perhaps you simply want an explanation about why something happened? It can be useful to put your concerns in writing, explaining the outcome you'd like and giving your therapist time to respond.

Your therapist may provide a satisfactory explanation or apology so you feel able to carry on with therapy.

But if you're not satisfied by the response, if you can't relate to your therapist, or if you don't feel safe with them, you don't have to continue. You may feel trapped and think you have to carry on but you don't. You can decide when to stop.

You also have the right to look for another therapist. If you're receiving therapy through an organisation, such as a GP practice, EAP or voluntary organisation, you may be able to switch to another therapist. If you're working with a private practitioner, you can simply approach another therapist.

If you're still really unhappy, you may wish to make an official complaint.

Making a complaint

To complain about therapists working through an organisation, contact the person responsible for the counselling service. The service is likely to have its own complaints procedure, which may include an internal grievance or mediation route.

To complain about a private practitioner, find out if they're a member of a professional organisation. Their membership organisation should have a complaints or professional conduct procedure.

All members of BACP are bound by our Ethical Framework and Professional Conduct Procedure. This means that they are committed to working to high professional and ethical standards. If you want to raise concerns about the service you have received, or about a member's conduct, see [How to complain about a BACP member](#) on our website.

If it's at all feasible and appropriate, try to resolve the issue with your therapist before making a formal complaint. Or you could consider seeking independent dispute resolution such as mediation or conciliation. Taking a complaint to a formal hearing can be a difficult and emotionally draining process.

BACP's Ask Kathleen service

Our Ask Kathleen service provides help, guidance and information on what to do if you have any concerns about your therapy or your therapist.

Anything you say is confidential and you can speak with us anonymously if you prefer.

We're available from Monday to Thursday 9.30am to 4pm. Calls are limited to a maximum of 30 minutes.

At other times or, if you have difficulty accessing the service by telephone, please leave us a voicemail or email us and we'll get back to you as soon as we can.

You can contact us by:

- telephone 07811 762114 or 07811 762256
- email ask@bacp.co.uk
- www.bacp.co.uk/about-therapy/ask-kathleen

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