

CHAPTER 1

FACING THE UNKNOWN:
FIRST STEPS INTO THERAPY

It takes courage to change. Talking about it is easy, but, at the moment of truth, when it's time to take action, something happens--you falter, pull back, get scared. Frustrating, isn't it? To change the course of your life, you have to be willing to step over the edge of the familiar, into the unknown. Therapy is a walk into the unknown, led by the therapist who is your experienced and supportive guide. The walk holds great promise, but the first step is up to you--making the decision to begin. When you consider making that move, you may discover just how rooted, how "set in your ways" you are. People get stuck in ruts--used to themselves, their lives and their problems.

What is it that stops action? What allows people to complain a lot, and even to discuss alternatives, but never make a move? One answer is fear--fear of risk. Whether you like where you are or not, it's what you're used to, and therefore predictable and safe, to some degree. Taking a risk means choosing to change, not knowing the result in advance, or how you will feel about it. There's no

guarantee that the outcome will be favorable, or as you planned. And to make matters worse, once a decision is put into action, you generally can't go back to the old way. So you're destined to follow through, carried by the momentum of your own making, whether you like it or not. No wonder you resist! It's natural. Having the courage to change is not only having the courage to face the uncertainty of the unknown, but also to accept responsibility for the decision.

Some of my clients, even after deciding to begin therapy, struggle to continue with it, for many weeks. One man, Gene, wondered aloud, "What am I doing here? What if this doesn't work and I'm wasting my time and money? How can I get into this when I don't know for sure what will happen to me?"

I understood Gene's concern and reluctance. Even though I couldn't give him a guarantee, I told him I had worked with many people and had seen their lives change, as mine had changed through my own therapy. I knew Gene was upset because he couldn't calculate his progress right away, so I told him, "Therapy is a subtle and complex process. You can't measure results clearly and simply--from the first day, like you could if you were building a house. Although you don't see it now, and you're uncomfortable taking chances, suddenly you will feel better, and your time and money will have been well

invested. You'll look forward to coming here, and you'll know you've made the right decision.

Even some people who love taking chances, and seek them out, have their limits. A person who is daring in one aspect of life may be timid in another. For example, someone who chooses to sky-dive may embrace the thrill of physical risk, but may shy away from emotional risk in intimate relationships.

Most people are upset by feeling too out of control; many never take risks voluntarily. Their lives are devoted to maintaining the safety of the status quo. This adherence to the familiar is often a reaction to a tumultuous or unpredictable early life, perhaps from an emotionally unstable family. Chaos is terrifying for children, so they respond by trying to control whatever they can--their own emotions, their bodies, their surroundings.

Since childhood, Gene was frightened by change. He grew up with a father who frequently started arguments, and then left the house, slamming the door behind him. No one knew when his father would be back--maybe late that night, maybe not until the next day. Gene's mother would withdraw into depression and drinking, when her husband left, occasionally venting her suppressed rage on those around her.

Gene used self-control to cope with the chaos. He said, "I used to do the same thing every time Dad left. I'd go to my room and start building something out of wooden blocks--one, two, three, four, five . . . I counted the blocks up to ten, as I placed them, and then started counting over again. I told myself that by the time I finished, Dad would be home. Sometimes it worked and he'd come home while I was still building. Other times I just went to sleep, because I couldn't stay awake any longer." Children think magically. Gene thought, by ordering the little world of his room, he could bring his father back and restore order and safety to the family.

In later life the traumatized adult may continue to try to avoid change, in order to preserve inner security. Of course no one can avoid change. Life changes us whether we welcome it or fight it. The reluctant individual will try to adjust or cope as quickly as possible, to minimize upset. Unfortunately, what is missed, in this passive acceptance of change, is the joy and power of responsibility. When we choose to change, we are creating our "selves," joining forces with life to change in a particular direction. There is a thrill and a satisfaction in this action, even if the result is failure. We learn from failure how to achieve success, and regardless of the results, we have taken a stand.

Responsibility is a paradox--it can be seen as both a burden and a freedom. Either way, there's no avoiding it. The person who attempts to avoid responsibility for change, by making no decisions, is indirectly deciding to stay the same.

Some people hope for change, hope that life will change their circumstances--do it for them. They sit back and wait for it to happen, so they don't have to do it themselves. Life does bring change--but not necessarily what they hope for.

Other people sincerely want a change, but believe it's impossible, at least impossible for them. They feel powerless, trapped and resigned. People with this negative belief are stuck in an illusion they perpetuate.

It's true that not all obstacles are surmountable, but negative beliefs can severely limit growth. There's no confidence in self, no faith in God or life. This pessimism often comes from a family in which the parents had little hope--where everyone was a victim, and nothing was possible, or where parents were critical or derogatory.

Philip and Barbara came to see me because they felt hopeless in their marriage. It was immediately evident that nothing dynamic was going on between them. They were both restrained, polite and depressed. As they discovered attitudes toward their relationships that were previously unexamined, Barbara remembered her mother's discouraging

platitudes: "If you don't expect anything, you won't be disappointed." "Men are all alike." "It has always been this way, and it will always be this way."

No matter what your feelings and beliefs are about change, it's unavoidable. And if you would like to participate in directing your life, you will have to accept the challenge of risk.

Psychotherapy is a way to facilitate change in your life, but making the decision to begin requires the kind of courage and faith you may feel you lack! Many people read about therapy, talk to friends about it, and consider it for months or even years before actually making a commitment to it. Others take the initial steps and begin, but then quickly back out. Therapy challenges the individual to face the unknown of the inner self, in a way that most people have never considered, nor even knew possible. As the process continues, it becomes apparent that their unknown, inner region is vast and deep. It contains truths which have been hidden and are often hard to acknowledge. It evokes intense, and sometimes threatening, feelings.

In The Road Less Traveled, M. Scott Peck, M.D., has this to say: "Entering psychotherapy is an act of the greatest courage. The primary reason people do not undergo psychotherapy is not that they lack the money but that they lack the courage. It is because they possess this courage,

on the other hand, that many psychoanalytic patients, even at the outset of therapy and contrary to their stereotypical image, are people who are basically much stronger and healthier than average."

To have courage doesn't mean being fearless, but rather to "take action in spite of being afraid." Often people begin psychotherapy hoping the experience will be a "quick fix." The unspoken (or sometimes spoken) wish is for a prescription--an insight or a formula for action--to solve their problems.

The truth is that the therapist is not a problem-solver, but a guide into the inner world of thoughts, feelings, and memories. This comes as a shock to most people, and sometimes a disappointment.

"You mean I have to do this myself?" The answer is, "Yes." The therapist has the map, but you have to take the trip. The route differs with each individual. What is the same for all, however, is facing the unknown; and what is shaken is no less than our identities.

We all have an image of ourselves. Self-image is complex, variable--and sometimes even vague, but we do identify ourselves as having certain characteristics and not others. Therapy throws this self-image into question. It challenges taken-for-granted beliefs. It reveals why we are certain ways, and examines our previously unexamined decisions to stay the same.

To illustrate: A woman named Cynthia began therapy with me to help her through the pain of divorce. Three months prior, she moved out of the house where she lived with her husband. She said she knew the marriage was wrong for her and she wanted to get on with her life. She couldn't understand why she still cried at night, and hadn't "gotten over it." Cynthia's self-image was one of strength, confidence, and efficiency--positive attributes.

As we began to work together, I learned she had left other relationships with the same fortitude and certainty of purpose. "Why waste time?" was her attitude. "It would be weak and masochistic to stay in a situation that's painful." On the surface, she was a very optimistic, self-affirming woman. But, as we looked further into her past, Cynthia revealed she left home at age fifteen, because her family life was "too painful," and she "never looked back." She took care of herself from then on, and was proud of it.

While this strategy had worked for Cynthia, something was missing. In order to survive the neglect and abuse of her parents, she made a decision to need no one, to "move-on"--away from the pain. With this pattern established, whenever things got rough in a relationship, she simply got out. In effect, she cut herself off from all deep feelings in relationships, in order not to be vulnerable--to protect herself from being hurt again.

This last time, however, was different; it didn't work. She was tired of running and tired of feeling nothing. The disappointment of her losses caught up with her. She couldn't stop crying and didn't know why. She felt weak, ashamed, confused.

The reasons for Cynthia's pain came pouring out. Long-buried feelings of hurt, despair and anger at her childhood circumstances began to surface. As the truth appeared to Cynthia, she became more and more agitated. Along with the pain of her feelings, her confident, strong self-image was threatened. She realized that the cost of maintaining invulnerable self-sufficiency was too high. All her adult life, she was proud of her strength--now she saw it in a different light. She saw that what she had called strength was actually a defense against hurt.

She wondered whether she had given up her relationships too soon. And what if that were true? What was she supposed to do about it? Her self-esteem was built around this willful, fast-moving personality she had developed. Her confidence was based on her ability to stay in control no matter what. Who would Cynthia be if she changed? She feared she would become someone that neither she nor anyone else could respect. She was afraid to let in feelings and get closer to people--that meant being vulnerable, weak and a victim of others. Her proud self-image would be lost.

This initial upset was only the beginning for Cynthia, and it all came as a big surprise. She had come to me seeking help to "get over" her divorce as quickly as possible. What she found instead was her unknown self. Her personal unknown was the world of deep feelings in intimate relationships. Cynthia had been living a life of emotional deprivation, begun in her childhood through her parents' neglect. In her adult life, she perpetuated the deprivation by never allowing herself to be really close to anyone, not even her husband. To avoid pain, she robbed herself of love.

Cynthia had to find the courage to face the truth about herself and feel the pain--not only of her childhood, but of what she missed in her adult life. Instead of being tough and controlled, in therapy she would have to let down her guard and open up to the grief inside. She previously saw vulnerability only as a weakness. Now Cynthia realized a paradox--it takes great strength to be vulnerable, to relinquish control and allow the painful healing process to take place.

This was another challenge to Cynthia's cherished self-image. She was at a crossroads. She could continue on her old familiar path, non-threatening and non-satisfying, or she could go in a new direction with the promise of more emotional fulfillment.

Taking a new path meant shedding some of her old identity. "Who will I be?" Cynthia asked. "And what guarantee do I have that I'll get what I want once I change?"

"There are no guarantees," I answered. "I wish there were. Everyone would have it easier that way. And 'Who will I be?' is unanswerable right now, too. Just like a caterpillar when building its cocoon doesn't know it will become a butterfly, you can't know your transformation until you experience it. Going into the cocoon is an act of faith. What have you got to lose?"

"Everything!" she cried.

"So it seems," I said, "but you won't. You'll lose only some negative aspects, and what you gain will be positive. You're attached to the old ways because they helped you survive, but they also caused you pain, and blocked happiness."

Identity is something so intangible and so close to us that we don't see it, we just take it for granted. Seeing one's own identity is like trying to see your face without a mirror. Introspection is threatening because it questions what seems so essential and basic to who we are. We're used to holding tightly to concepts of ourselves. When we challenge those beliefs, we encounter a lot of resistance.

How many times have you heard it said, "People don't change"? That belief is a defense and a trap--keeping us stuck. People do change. Circumstances and experience change people, sometimes for better and sometimes for worse. However, for change to occur in a less random manner, in harmony with our values and wishes, we have to participate in, and direct, the change process. We must become conscious of our problems, define the ways we want to change, and commit ourselves to the work required to bring about the desired results. The work requires stepping into the unknown, which is painful.

When we dare to change, we are temporarily faced with a void, an uncertainty. This is a transition period which can be extremely uncomfortable. It feels as if one's body, mind and soul are being stretched in all directions, while going nowhere. This transition feels like walking in the dark--blind and fumbling. You want desperately to push for a solution, but there is none yet.

There are other situations which evoke this type of discomfort, to a lesser degree--like starting a new job, or entering a social group without knowing anyone.

From time to time during this stressful and confusing transition, Cynthia felt like giving up, quitting. "What's the point of all this?" she'd ask. "I feel worse than when I started. At least then I knew who I was."

In the midst this angst, one is constantly pulled back to the old ways. Wouldn't it be easier to give up the struggle and go back to the familiar? It's tempting. And many people do give up. They start enthusiastically, only to bail out when it gets rough. Any process involving letting go of something, or building something new takes determination and tenacity.

Poet W.H. Auden wrote:

We would rather be ruined than changed
We would rather die in our dread
Than climb the cross of the moment
And let our illusions die.

Any change involves loss, and loss is very often painful. When we leave something behind--a house, a job, a lover, a city, an addiction or an aspect of our self-image--there is almost always some sadness involved.

The change may be welcome, but the house, job, or lover left behind wasn't all bad. So while we might be glad to give up some aspects, we cling to the ones which made us happy. Anything we depended on in the past offered something--some meaning, connection, safety or refuge--even if minimal.

You might ask, "What could possibly be sad about letting go of alcoholism or an abusive relationship?"

For an alcoholic, drinking is a reliable source of comfort or escape, and, unlike dealings with people, a

"friendship" with alcohol doesn't seem, to the alcoholic, to require compromise. Of course, eventually the "friend" becomes an enemy, potentially causing loss of health, family, respect, often loss of job and all security. Nevertheless, when the addiction is relinquished, a great void remains which requires a total change in lifestyle, and behavior, to fill. Therapy provides support in the processes of letting go of the old, as well as constructing the new.

Grieving for what is lost in the change is a difficult part of growing, but a vital one. When past losses and disappointments have been especially crushing or numerous, experiencing more pain seems intolerable. It isn't. Slowly and with help, you work through it, and reach a new beginning.

Letting go of alcohol was especially difficult for Barry, an acquaintance of mine. He learned to drink at home with his father, Gil, a boisterous, fun-loving man who, according to Barry, "worked hard and drank hard." Gil taught Barry a lot of things, and Barry loved and admired his father. When Barry became a young adult, he and Gil often went to bars together. Occasionally, Gil would get so drunk he'd curse and insult people in the bar.

"Where was your mother in all this?" I asked.

"Oh, she stayed home," he answered. "She was always depressed and tired."

At the time, no one seemed to think there was a problem, least of all Barry. However, years later, Barry's life was full of problems. When I met him, he was in Alcoholics Anonymous, and had been sober for four years. He told me the story:

"At 22, I married a woman I met in a bar. We loved to 'party' together--in fact our relationship was based on it--drinking and sex. It took some time before the party degenerated into cheating, lying and other abuse. It got so sick and ugly, and finally ended when I caught her with another man. I think she really wanted me to find her with him, so we could both get out.

"When I left her, I was miserable, and went downhill fast, drinking. I lost my job, hated myself. Then I went to see a therapist who took one look at me and suggested an A.A. meeting.

"Of course, I didn't think of myself as an alcoholic, but I was desperate, so I went to A.A. and therapy. I realized not only was I an alcoholic, but so was my ex-wife, and so was my father!"

What Barry discovered was that the ritual of drinking had been woven into the fabric of his relationship with his father. Drinking, he had been taught, was part of being a man, and part of love. The threads of his father's love for him, and his love for his father, were criss-crossed and tangled with the ever-present thread of alcohol. No

wonder he married a woman who drank; it was a familiar relationship.

Barry continued: "I finally realized what drinking meant to me--it was part of my masculinity, and my only link to intimacy with other people. How could I give that up? No way did I want to, but in therapy and A.A., it began to dawn on me that I had to do it. I saw that drinking actually got in the way--my father's addiction just hid his true feelings, and I was doing the same. Being a drunk did not make me a man. And the relationships I'd experienced with my parents and ex-wife were just shadows of real intimacy.

"I'd always loved my parents, and thought my father was great--especially compared to my mother, who was so silent and withdrawn--but now I see that drinking also keeps people at a distance. They were both in pain and didn't know how to be close to each other. So I didn't get much of what I really needed from either of them. What I did get from Dad, I cherished, but it had booze written all over it. To get his love, I had to drink, too. Quitting felt like losing the only thing I ever could count on. And I felt I was losing my link to my family. The separation was so painful, but I had to let go of the bottle if I wanted to grow--if I ever wanted to find out what was possible for me."

There are those for whom the pain of growth feels insurmountable: they close their hearts forever. Hardened hearts and rigid minds are evident all around us. The decision to shut down and retreat from emotional vulnerability is often made at an early age, attempting protection against further losses. But to heal loss, we must feel loss.

By retreating from risk of loss, the illusion of safety is created. While a retreat appears to ward off danger, it creates new problems--loneliness, limitations, and the fears accompanying isolation. "We can run but we can't hide." We can never truly hide from life. Accepting the risk of living and choosing to grow is not easy. Facing the unknown requires a leap of faith. "Faith in what?" you may ask.

One answer to that is, "Faith in the healing process of nature (some call that nature 'God')." Healing does happen, and when it does, the need to live defensively is lessened.

Another answer is, "Faith in yourself." You wouldn't be asking the questions, if you weren't prepared to hear the answers, and to do your share of the work. "You can pray as if it all depends on God, but work as if it all depends on you."

Finally, have faith in your therapist--to guide and support you.

"Yes, but," you object, "how do I choose a therapist? How do I know who to trust?" Very good questions--which deserve a thorough reply.

There are many therapists and types of therapy around these days. The thought of having to choose one is enough to make some people give up before they begin. T.V. and movies don't help, as they usually portray unappealing stereotypes: the outdated image of the cold, authoritarian male peering over his desk; the more modern (but equally discouraging), sentimental, simpleton pal/shrink, feigning empathy and sincerity; the detached money-grubber who couldn't care less about the client; the unethical one who takes sexual advantage in the name of treatment. Needless to say, there are those who are rigid, ineffective or inappropriate, mawkish or greedy. But there are also those who are committed, ethical and expert, and who care about their clients.

So how do you choose? I say you use a combination of information and intuition:

- A good place to start is getting a referral from someone you know.
- Lacking such a personal connection, you can get names through doctors, hospitals, clinics, or graduate schools.
- Finally, there's the Yellow Pages or other forms of advertisement.

- If money is a problem, there are sliding-fee schedules. You can find therapists in training who will work with you at reduced rates.
- As you gather names, determine if the therapist's specialty meets your needs.
- Ask yourself if you prefer to work with a woman or a man. If you have an immediate feeling/response to that question, trust it. If not, gender probably doesn't matter to you.
- Next step, make some appointments and shop around. Better to invest in an initial session with several therapists, than to risk wasting a lot of time because of a hasty decision.

You can't choose the "right" therapist strictly by credentials or factual information. Here's where your intuition plays a part. During the first sessions, ask yourself, "How do I feel with this person? Is this someone I can talk to easily? Do I feel heard? Understood? Are there any danger signals?" The personal qualities of a therapist--presence, integrity, compassion, warmth and openness--are as important as technical or theoretical expertise.

Once you've made a choice, remember it's not irrevocable. Time will reveal more. As your relationship develops, you'll learn the scope of your therapist's capacities and the depth of his or her emotional support.

In Thou Shalt Not Be Aware, author Alice Miller writes: "The ability [of a therapist] to perceive and understand someone else's suffering depends more than anything else on the degree to which one has experienced the suffering of one's own childhood."

Above all, trust yourself. If at any point you feel dissatisfied, upset, or misunderstood by your therapist, say so. If s/he doesn't listen to you, doesn't acknowledge your feelings or remains defensive, you're probably with the wrong person.

The "expert" is not always right. The old view of the professional as all-powerful and all-knowing has contributed to many people's fear of getting help. True, the client is vulnerable, and a therapist's competence is essential, but the therapist is also human. You are the ultimate authority. If something feels wrong and you can't work it out, leave. You'll find help elsewhere.

Taking those first steps is tough, no matter who you are. But waiting won't make it any easier.

I remember how tentative my first approach to getting help was. I enrolled in a class to learn about a type of therapy I was interested in, but too afraid to pursue directly. What was I afraid of? The unknown. And I was ashamed to reveal my problems to another human being. I kidded myself into believing I could get what I needed through generalized information. I was still hiding. But

fortunately, events did not unfold the way I planned. At the first class meeting, it was apparent that enrollment was insufficient. So the class was cancelled.

As the students dispersed, I panicked. My fragile link to therapy was vanishing! With only seconds remaining, I sacrificed my self-protection and courageously approached the teacher, asking, "Would you happen to know of a therapist in this area I could work with?" What bravery! I could hardly believe those words were coming out of my mouth.

She said, "Yes," and that was the beginning. Those circumstances worked together to further my growth. I'm convinced now that on that day as well as many others before and since, I was assisted by a Power greater than myself to move forward.

"Until one is committed there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back, always ineffectiveness. Concerning all acts of initiative (and creation) there is one elementary truth the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans: that the moment one definitely commits oneself, Providence moves too. All sorts of things then occur to help one that would never otherwise have occurred. A whole stream of events issue from the decision, raising in one's favor all manner of unforeseen incidents and meetings and material assistance which no one could have dreamed would come his way. WHATEVER YOU CAN DO OR DREAM YOU CAN, BEGIN IT. BOLDNESS HAS GENIUS, POWER AND MAGIC IN IT. BEGIN IT NOW."

--GOETHE