

 Essential Guide Series

What It Takes to be a Great Therapist

17 Expert Therapists Share Decades of Collected Wisdom



Written by Joshua Schultz, Psy.D.

Published by PositivePsychology.com B.V.

Copyright © 2021 by PositivePsychology.com B.V.

All rights reserved.

This eBook or any portion thereof may not be reproduced,
relabelled, or used in any commercial manner whatsoever without the
express written permission of the publisher.

PositivePsychology.com

Gandhiplein 16

6229HN MAASTRICHT

The Netherlands

Foreword

Over the years many of our readers at PositivePsychology.com have had questions about therapy and the process of becoming a therapist. We have addressed several of these questions in our ebook: *On Becoming a Therapist*, a step-by-step guide to the many paths that lead to therapy.

While the ebook explains how to become a therapist, conveying what it takes to become a *great* therapist warrants a different approach. We decided to go directly to the source, sending interview questions to a sample of great therapists and compiling their answers here.

Many of the therapists here are personally known to the author, Joshua Schultz, PsyD, and are located in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. We recruited the others participants through an email survey, through which we chose our most accomplished therapist subscribers. The result is a document representing a wide range of experiences in the field. Our contributors have different theoretical orientations, credentials, and clinical experiences. Some are recent graduates, the words of their teachers still ringing in their ears. Others are seasoned veterans who have conducted therapy for more than 50 years.

Unfortunately, there is no therapist hall of fame you can visit to learn about great therapists. Therapists are not like rock stars, movie stars, or even carpenters; their work happens behind closed doors. Therapy is impactful, yet intangible. It occurs within the mental space between the therapist and client, the resulting “product” being the increased happiness, healthiness, and satisfaction of the client.

We chose our questions to address a curiosity that many share: *What makes a therapist great?* You will see that each contributor puts a different spin on this question. As you read, you will notice the nuance of their responses. Simply put, there are many ways to be a great and effective therapist for your clients.

We collected these answers during the COVID-19 pandemic, and you will see that some of the therapists mention its impact in their writings. COVID has forced significant changes to the field with many therapists working remotely, serving their clients over the internet. Teletherapy is more prevalent and accessible than ever before, a fact that some therapists find encouraging, despite the circumstances.

It is an understatement to say that the pandemic has escalated levels of unrest, uncertainty, and suffering, increasing the world's need for and interest in the art of therapy. At this time, therapists are providing an essential service for people experiencing isolation, grief, unemployment, or any of the other misfortunes all too prevalent today.

Our hope is that this book inspires you, builds your knowledge of what it takes to be a great therapist, and, if you so desire, motivates you to become one yourself.

List of Contributors

- ▶ Caroline Kuttler, MS, LPC
- ▶ Patrick R. Hoolahan, PsyD
- ▶ Naeema Akter, PsyD
- ▶ Sari Fleischman, PsyD
- ▶ Dennis Debiak, PsyD
- ▶ Karishma Lalchandani, PsyD
- ▶ Sharon St. Pierre, LCSW
- ▶ Elizabeth K. Misener, PhD
- ▶ Harvey Hillin, PhD
- ▶ Jason Holloway, PsyD
- ▶ Jacqueline Julien, PsyD, LP
- ▶ John Burns, LCSW
- ▶ Jeanie Hebert-Brown, LCSW
- ▶ Rosemary Huber, LPC
- ▶ Marion Rudin Frank, EdD, MA
- ▶ Marcia Hanlon, LCSW
- ▶ Michelle Warner Hyde, MS, CAADC

...Among others who wished to answer our questions anonymously. We want to thank all who contributed their wisdom, time, and expertise to this project. Your efforts will help elevate the next generation of therapists. Some of the responses below have been lightly edited for clarity, but the core message of each remains unchanged.

What, at its core, is the job of a therapist?

We decided first and foremost to explore what it is that therapists do for their clients. What role or function do they serve, and how do they do it? While many have an idea of what a therapist is supposed to do, we decided to ask the experts to distill their work down to its simplest explanation. What follows is the result of our contributors sifting through the details of their life's work to give a simple and straightforward explanation of the therapist's role.

When clients come to me for treatment, and it is their first time in therapy, they often express concerns and fears. Life presents many challenges, and it can be incredibly difficult to process and face that alone. At its core, I believe a therapist's job is to be a social support in someone's life that can provide a sense of safety, trust, and vulnerability. It is also the therapist's job (with the client's consent) to provide tools to help make the client's day-to-day life a bit easier. Once a strong relationship is established, then the tools and techniques from evidence-based practice may be used. This includes helping them process grief or trauma, challenge distorted thoughts, and learn how to safely and effectively cope with anxiety.

Life presents many challenges, and it can be incredibly difficult to process and face that alone

– Caroline Kuttler, MS, LPC

I've heard a lot of answers to this, and it really has to be up to the individual therapist and their style to determine what their core job is. Some have said they are teachers, they are healers, or they are analysts. I have always seen myself as a liberator. The key job of a therapist is to help people free themselves from whatever is holding them back from living their best life. That combines all of the ideas of teaching new skills, exploring the meaning of past events, reframing thought patterns, discovering patterns of behavior and beliefs, and helping people create new patterns of living. Whether it's addiction, trauma, anxiety, depression, or anything else, the goal of therapy is helping people live free of the restraints of those conditions. Not curing them or getting rid of them, but freeing them from being held back in their lives by those conditions.

I have always seen myself as a liberator

– Patrick R. Hoolahan, PsyD

I believe the job of the therapist is to assist clients in seeing a different perspective and live a life according to their values. As humans, we often see the world through our subjective lens and internal experiences, and I believe that the collaborative effort of the therapist can allow clients to see the world differently. In gaining a different perspective, clients can gain insight into their problems. Similarly, individuals often become distracted by life and forget their values. The therapist helps clients recognize their values and find ways to live a life in line with those values. This is no small feat. At its core, the job of the therapist is to guide clients to live a more fulfilling life.

– Naeema Akter, PsyD

To guide clients
to live a more
fulfilling life

As therapists, we have the privilege of letting our clients feel seen. Oftentimes clients have lacked the mirroring in their lives required to feel validated in their feelings, to help them form a solid sense of self, and to feel in control of their emotional experiences. At its core, the job of the therapist is to create the space for our clients to safely engage in exploration and growth. Through our training, we are armed with a wealth of knowledge. We are the experts on theories and techniques, and our clients are the experts on themselves and their emotional experience.

When we combine our perspective with that of our clients, we help them to expand their ability for self-growth and healing.

– Sari Fleischman, PsyD

We are the experts
on theories and
techniques, and
our clients are
the experts on
themselves

The job of a therapist is to help clients take a bird's-eye view of their lives, including how their individual history and family history [shape] their thoughts, feelings, expectations, and behavior. As the client develops greater insight into themselves and begins to appreciate their blindspots, a therapist helps them develop ways of counteracting self-defeating reactions or patterns. The therapist must pay close attention to their reactions to the client and how these might reflect the client's experience or the experience of those [people] in the client's life (i.e., complementary or concordant countertransference) [editor's note: Countertransference is the therapist's emotional reaction to

Therapists must
realize that
objectivity or
neutrality is
impossible

the client]. Therapists must realize that objectivity or neutrality is impossible and that they must constantly look inward to understand their contribution to what's happening in the relationship with the client.

– Dennis Debiak, PsyD

My job is to help my clients become their own therapists, to be able to create a voice inside their head that guides them to make fulfilling choices even outside of therapy.

– Karishma Lalchandani, PsyD

I think people answer this question very differently, and any one therapist would answer this question differently throughout their career. But I think the primary and most essential responsibility of the therapist is to establish, support, and maintain an emotionally alive and responsive relationship with their patient. Whatever else is done by the therapist can be decided by the therapist's theoretical persuasion or even the specific diagnostic needs of the patient; however, I think any patient who has ever experienced transformation from psychotherapy has done so because of the unique intimacy found in the therapeutic relationship.

Establishing and maintaining this kind of relationship is no small challenge; to do this, therapists must accept their own emotional vulnerability and avoid taking comfort in some illusion that patients do not come to know or understand very intimate things about us as the therapeutic process unfolds. Instead, what it means to engage patients in therapeutic relationships is that therapists themselves become important participants in the relationship and unwittingly reveal much about themselves as the process proceeds. One way beginners protect themselves from the vulnerability of being a therapist is to try and render themselves “blank screens” or impersonal observers of their patients; this often ends up working against progress in therapy and can alienate patients.

– Anonymous

**To help my clients
become their own
therapists**

**To establish,
support, and
maintain an
emotionally alive
and responsive
relationship**

My role as a therapist is to connect, empower, and shift people using a growth mindset perspective. The therapist should have a toolbox full of hundreds of tools that they can call on to support their clients. If one tool doesn't work, they move on to another tool. It's important to set specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, time-bound goals to be able to measure if the tool works for the client.

A core responsibility of the therapist is to have an awareness of their personal triggers. Through mindfulness training, therapists can learn to notice their emotions in a session and to set them aside so they may be present for the client. The therapist models behavior, does psychoeducation, and offers practices to support client wellbeing.

– Elizabeth K. Misener, PhD

To be attentive to and respectful of the dignity of the human being you are working with. Your primary job as a therapist is to form an alliance with the client so that they may learn new ways to cope and to support their sense of autonomy and self-mastery. The success of your technique will depend upon the patient's sense of this alliance and your selecting a therapy that aligns with the patient's personal characteristics and desired outcomes. Therapists should seek to learn as many approaches as they find congenial and convincing, creating a good match for each client and, if necessary, modifying the approach. You should solicit and honor feedback from the client at each session. Be willing to improvise and discover what works.

– Harvey Hillin, PhD

The job of the therapist is to support another person in enhancing their ability to work, love, and play. The therapist does this by listening in very particular ways.

The therapist must attend to the patient's emotional material, unconscious wishes and fears, defensive strategies, and transference to the therapist. The therapist helps the patient repair damage that has occurred in their relational world, and the therapist does this by providing a new type of relationship that supports the patient in trusting anew.

– Jason Holloway, PsyD

To have an awareness of their personal triggers

To form an alliance with the client so that they may learn new ways to cope

Work, love, and play

At its core, the job of a therapist is to provide a space where people can be themselves without fear of judgment. Within this space, clients are able to speak freely to an objective third party, get to the bottom of their issues, figure out what they would like to have in their life, and how they can go about building the life that they want.

I liken therapy to being a tour guide. Therapists walk alongside their clients, looking at experiences, past and present, in their life. We ask clients to take a closer look at and find meaning in those experiences. Life can be compared to a building you might see on a tour. In therapy we explore how the little 'bricks' of experiences stack together to make up the client's life. Then we dive further into which bricks need to be replaced or repaired to build the life they want. We can also look at which bricks are strong and sturdy that we can use as a base to build up from.

– Jacqueline Julien, PsyD, LP

To be as open and unbiased as you can possibly be. The client is the expert in their own life, and our job is to be a resource. We need to be well informed but not dogmatic in our approach to the problems our clients are facing.

– John Burns, LCSW

The therapist is a witness to the concerns, experiences, and thoughts of the client. The therapist needs to be patient, compassionate, loving; ask good questions; and suggest healthy, solid ideas to deal with the client's concerns.

It requires an ability to focus attention and watch the client intently in order to notice shifts inside the client as they play across their face or body. It takes patience because some people discuss their life very slowly.

The therapist's job is to figure out how to accept and love each client as they help the client move closer to their goals[...]. Good therapists always listen for a chance to reframe the client's life in a positive manner.

– Jeanie Hebert-Brown, LCSW

I liken therapy to being a tour guide

To be well informed, but not dogmatic

To figure out how to accept and love each client

A therapist is trained to help people reduce symptoms associated with mental illness, facilitate good self-care and communication, and improve their overall emotional wellbeing. There are different approaches therapists use when working with clients. I use an eclectic approach pulling from cognitive-behavioral therapy and person-centered therapy. I follow the client's lead, work on the development of healthy coping strategies, and help to change unhelpful thought and behavior patterns. Many of my clients suffer from anxious and negative thoughts. I encourage them to look for evidence to challenge the automatic self-talk. Usually the evidence doesn't support it!

– Rosemary Huber, LPC

The job of the therapist is to be available and open to anybody and any conditions a client brings into a session.

Solid training and psychological knowledge is essential, as well as an open mind to accept and go with a huge range of client backgrounds, life experiences, attitudes, outlooks, communication abilities/styles, ethnicities, ages, and sexual and gender orientations.

The therapist must be confident enough to be willingly open to experiencing whatever the client brings, while at the same time being able to assess and evaluate the content of the session. The therapist must be able to cut through the noise, or the silence, to uncover the problem as the client experiences it. Then the therapist must help the client define the problem and use their skills to facilitate the client's strengths to manage or hopefully to resolve the problem.

The therapist must help the client learn to appreciate the process of therapy (so the client can see it as a resource now and in the future) and must help the client clarify their situation to draw on internal skills and to learn new skills for effectively coping now and in the future.

– Marcia Hanlon, LCSW

To help people
reduce symptoms
associated with
mental illness

To cut through
the noise, or the
silence, to uncover
the problem as the
client experiences it

Therapists have many aspects to their work. Hence, there's room for many types of therapy. For me, I believe there are a few core qualities of therapy, including skill, caring, innovation, and flexibility. Without those qualities, therapists cannot transition their practice into the unique art or mission that therapy really can become.

As we learn and apply skills through school, life experience, and interactive experience with our clients, we present ourselves as a responder – the mirror to another person's soul. We are there to light the way back to their inborn potential, as adverse experiences, ill health, or other interruptions have taken them off their pathway. We present tools, education, and hope. Most of all, we apply the skills of listening and hearing. A young therapist can go a long way towards creating simple healing by just listening intently to their client's story and being completely present. They don't need sympathy or empathy – just presence. This sounds simple, but if it were, people would be getting this from their everyday world and wouldn't come for therapy.

Flexibility refers to the idea that once we learn the rules, we must then learn how to break them. It's a call to our own internal innovative process. When I was in training with a one-way mirror, I was critiqued on how I sat, what I did with my hands, how emotions crossed my face. I was being trained, in some ways, to be stiff and afraid to yield to the experience of being present with my clients. When I went to work with adolescents, I had to relearn the way I did things, sitting on a big couch with my legs curled under me, using an appropriate sense of humor, and learning to look at my hands while talking to some children instead of creating anxious eye contact. I remember at the time laughing to myself thinking about how my dean would have censured me for that. In total, the core job is an integration of the therapist's self and the client's self, for a finite period of time, so that no harm is sustained by either and, hopefully, healing occurs. Maybe for both.

**We are there to
light the way back
to their inborn
potential**

– Michelle Warner Hyde, MS, CAADC

Summary

- ▶ Therapists create a unique space for their clients to inhabit. Through the careful work of the therapist, the therapy room becomes a space where clients can feel safe enough to be vulnerable. Within the presence of the therapist, clients are free to be themselves without fear of judgment and to engage in the exploration of difficult topics.
- ▶ The therapist forms a special kind of relationship with the client, sometimes called an alliance. This alliance is a kind of emotional and social support system. The therapist offers unconditional acceptance, while also asking probing, thought-provoking questions. This unique combination of attitude and behavior pushes the client to grow.
- ▶ A core responsibility of the therapist is to remain as open and unbiased as possible. They maintain this stance by treating each client with flexibility, skill, and caring.
- ▶ Some therapists see their core job as a pursuit to make themselves obsolete or, in other words, to help clients become their own therapists. They may do this by modeling mindful emotional awareness; by asking good questions and suggesting solid, healthy ideas for the client's concerns; or by helping the client zoom out and realize how their experiences are connected.
- ▶ The therapist can be seen as a liberator, helping to free clients from whatever is holding them back from living their best lives. Some therapists accomplish this by helping their clients to identify their values and live according to them. Others do this by being willing to experience the client's life alongside them while facilitating their existing strengths.
- ▶ A classic interpretation of this question, related to Freudian theory, is that the therapist's core responsibility is to enhance another person's ability to work, play, and love; in other words, to help reduce symptoms associated with mental illness and improve overall emotional wellbeing.
- ▶ Therapists believe deeply in the potential of their clients and of all human beings. Some see their role as helping to light their clients' way back to their inborn potential.

What does your typical work week look like?

In order to understand the opinions and advice expressed herein, it's important to have an accurate picture of the context in which therapists work. In this section each contributor provides a vivid description of their day-to-day. If you are thinking of pursuing a career in therapy, these responses can help you imagine the kind of work you would like to do.

For the last year and a half, I have been working primarily as an outpatient therapist in a community mental health setting at a treatment center in northern Philadelphia that caters to the Latino/Hispanic population. For the last year I have also begun to take on private practice clients for two to three hours per week. All of my sessions since March 2020 have been conducted entirely through telehealth, video or phone.

A full week of sessions can be exhausting

Mondays are a light day for me – no more than two sessions and an hour of supervision. A full week of sessions can be exhausting, and I like to ease into it. The rest of the week I schedule six to seven clients a day with the expectation [that] I will have at least one cancellation per day. I typically have 20–25 hour-long sessions per week.

– Caroline Kuttler, MS, LPC

[...] In private practice, I would typically see clients for 25–30 hours a week, between both groups and individual sessions. I also had an hour and a half Dialectical Behavior Therapy weekly consult meeting, and the remaining hours for notes, preparation, and research. In other settings, there would be more supervision hours as well. I always try to leave some time for notes and prep, and to have some flexibility in my schedule so that if a client needs an emergency session, I can accommodate them.

I always try to leave some time for notes and prep

– Patrick R. Hoolahan, PsyD

I spend most of my time providing psychotherapy to individuals, couples, and groups. Working in private practice, I have the privilege of setting my schedule. I work late hours a couple of nights a week to see clients who are unable to meet during the workday. My day generally starts at 9 a.m. but can start later if I am ending at 9 p.m. After psychotherapy, the rest of my time is spent maintaining necessary paperwork and communicating with potential clients. After every therapy session, I write therapy notes that detail the content of the sessions. I have profiles across multiple therapy platforms, and I check my voicemails, emails, and the profiles to answer any questions potential clients may have about my services. I provide a free 15-minute consultation for prospective clients. Furthermore, a small amount of time is also spent on supervision and consultation with other clinicians at the practice to discuss therapy cases.

– Naeema Akter, PsyD

**I provide a
free 15-minute
consultation for
prospective clients**

As a psychologist, I like to balance my workload with therapy and evaluations. Currently, I do three days a week of therapy sessions, seven to eight per day, and one day a week of shorter mental status evaluations. This evaluation work feels like a good balance to the emotional work of doing therapy.

– Sari Fleischman, PsyD

**Evaluation work
feels like a good
balance to the
emotional work of
doing therapy**

I usually see clients from about 10 a.m. until 6 p.m. Monday through Friday]. I see clients for 45 minutes at a time and I usually see 8–10 clients per day. In between, I write notes, check email, or take a breather. I also meet each week with a group of colleagues to discuss our work, the state of the world, or something we've read.

– Dennis Debiak, PsyD

My typical work week consists of 25–30 individual or couples therapy sessions along with about three to five hours of phone consultations with prospective clients, consultations with psychiatrists or other professionals working with my clients to coordinate care, writing therapy notes, prepping for sessions, and responding to client emails that I receive once in a while.

**25–30 individual
or couples therapy
sessions**

– Karishma Lalchandani, PsyD

The bulk of my professional time is spent in my independent practice, treating patients (and sometimes couples) in outpatient psychotherapy. While the number of hours I've devoted to treating patients has fluctuated over the years, my current average is between 32 and 35 patient-hours a week. In addition to meeting with patients, I also tend to be involved in some form of teaching or training. In the fall, I typically teach a course or lead a case conference with a local psychoanalytic institute; in the spring, I teach a first-year graduate course on psychoanalytic psychotherapy. Finally, to keep myself balanced, I usually spend two to three hours a week in consultation or supervision of my own work.

– Anonymous

**My current average
is between 32 and
35 patient-hours
a week**

I have three part-time jobs, two of which are related to healing after abortion. One, I provide training to mental health clinicians on how to work with this population. For the second, I coordinate the ministry that serves these people and offer psychoeducation to the community on disenfranchised grief. My third job is running the counseling department for a nonprofit, where I supervise interns who offer mental health to the community and four private Catholic elementary schools. So my typical week is balancing all those jobs out. I supervise, train, research, and plan content for presentations.

– Sharon St. Pierre, LCSW

**I have three
part-time jobs**

What I love about being a therapist is that there is no typical work week for me. I might not be your typical therapist, as I believe some of my clients need to see me weekly and some need to see me when they have issues in life that they need to process. I tend to start my week with a few clients booked and then hours open for people who need to see me that week. Typically, my client sessions are 55 minutes. I tend to work Monday to Friday. Part of my work week is making sure I learn something new, typically in the field of positive psychology. I am always looking for new tools that support my clients' growth.

– Elizabeth K. Misener, PhD

**There is no typical
work week**

Client contact, documentation in electronic medical records, meetings, emailing and calling collateral contacts (health care providers, probation officers, etc.), mentoring others in practicum supervision.

– Harvey Hillin, PhD

I am a postdoctoral resident at an HIV and substance use integrated care clinic. I spend about half of my time in video or phone sessions with patients. Some patients are regular weekly attendees of psychotherapy; some are more sporadic, and we do not have a set time but will speak one or even two times per week. There are also patients who require additional care and are attending regular medical appointments, and the psychology department is encouraged to support patients engaging with medical care. I also have a weekly psychotherapy group for people living with HIV that I co-lead with a clinical psychology trainee. I spend other time in a few forms of group supervision, as well as individual supervision with two different supervisors. I also spend time calling my patients' other providers to discuss their care, in addition to coordinating with administrative staff and case managers at my clinic, all of whom play an essential role in providing a reparative care experience. I write notes in the off-hours or when a patient does not [...] attend a scheduled session.

– Jason Holloway, PsyD

My week is not typical of many therapists. I provide therapy, and I also teach college-level psychology. I am a solo practitioner, which means it is just me. I provide therapy three days a week. In a typical therapy day, I meet individually with five to seven clients for a “therapy hour” of 50 minutes. The 10 minutes I have between clients is used for writing notes about sessions (which I am required by law to keep), returning phone calls, grabbing a snack, or using the restroom. After the day is completed, I finish any notes that I have not completed, and I am done for the day.

– Jacqueline Julien, PsyD, LP

Mentoring others in practicum supervision

I spend about half of my time in video or phone sessions

I am a solo practitioner

I own a small private practice, so I rack up quite a few hours during the week. The first two business days are 12 hours long so that some evening appointments are available. I also make Saturday morning appointments available. So generally, I have between 25–30 face-to-face sessions per week.

Between sessions with clients, the “business of the business” gets done: calls to third-party payers, meeting with candidates for open positions, billing, bookkeeping, and generally anything else that needs to be done.

– John Burns, LCSW

In the past, I worked at mental health agencies, and then I would be at work for specific hours and do whatever tasks I was assigned. When I had a baby at age 39, I began my private practice, and so for the last 37 years, I have set my own hours and been available for important events in my personal life.

Many years I shared an office with other practitioners. But at age 65, I developed Parkinson’s disease and eventually decided to move my practice to my home. This has been very cozy and supportive. In 2020, because of the coronavirus pandemic, I began an online teleconferencing practice. It is not my favorite way of being with people, but it’s what the times call for.

For me, being a psychotherapist has been a nice career that is flexible so that you can follow your interests and focus your work on particular concerns. Currently, I am doing lots of couple counseling. Also it is nice to have a career where you are ascribed more credibility the older you are.

– Jeanie Hebert-Brown, LCSW

My typical work week is Monday to Saturday. I work in a school from 7 [a.m.] to 3 p.m. weekdays and 4 p.m. to 8 p.m. in my private practice office three evenings a week, as well as Saturday mornings. I see an average of 15–17 private clients weekly ranging in age from high school through adult. The greatest part of working for myself is the flexibility; I can get creative with scheduling.

**I also make
Saturday morning
appointments
available**

**For the last 37
years, I have set my
own hours**

**The greatest part of
working for myself
is the flexibility**

Telehealth has also made therapy more accessible to all. Using a secure online platform, I can meet individuals and couples and even run online counseling groups.

– Rosemary Huber, LPC

Before COVID, I spent three to four days in my Philadelphia office and one day per week seeing patients at home. Rarely did I work virtually and only on the phone, on an as-needed basis. [During the Coronavirus pandemic], like every other therapist, I am working on a Zoom-like platform with everyone, although my responsibilities are essentially the same, and I obviously no longer engage in taking leisurely or working lunches with colleagues and staff.

A variety of
different projects
take turns
consuming me

As founder and president of [Professional Psychology Services, PC] (started in 1980), an outpatient mental health company primarily serving employee assistance programs and managed care clients, I consult with two full-time administrative staff and 15 independently contracted therapists. I troubleshoot when necessary, solving problems that may arise with our 50 contracted companies or in response to internal issues. In addition, I have a private practice, including supervision, in which my clinical caseload (currently encompassing ages 20–92) has been intentionally downsized from 30 to 15 client-hours per week over the past three years, as I approach my 80th birthday.

Over the years, my typical week has slowly transformed. I now devote less time to presentations and leadership activities within professional organizations. A variety of different projects take turns consuming me. There are times when working on the business aspects of my company has been primary. At other times, I have devoted more time to writing or teaching and have been adjunct faculty at various universities in the area. For many years, I offered women's groups as well as individual therapy. For more than 10 years, I coordinated a monthly continuing education seminar for mental health professionals, bringing in experts from [the United States] and other countries who were scholars in analytic psychotherapy, most often focusing on the work of Carl Jung.

– Marion Rudin Frank, EdD, MA

I usually work normal business hours unless an emergency comes up, requiring me to stay late or to respond to telephone discussions about how to handle a mental health situation. My career has been spent in a college/university setting, so the work of the Counseling Center is within a “host” environment. This means that our psychotherapy work is not the main mission of the institution, which in this case is education, but that our presence is to support the main mission.

Because I am in a “host” setting, I have to be responsive to others in the institution, so I check my email frequently throughout the day and have to attend weekly meetings with others from varying offices across campus.

I have student therapy sessions scheduled throughout the day. I am able to control that aspect of my day, though every effort is made to make myself available when a client is available (i.e., I seldom eat lunch at noon because that is a popular time when students are available). I usually see a maximum of four or five clients per day so that I have time to take notes, respond to inquiries, and attend meetings. The number of clients I see also varies by the academic calendar, with fewer clients early in the semester, after which the number steadily increases.

– Marcia Hanlon, LCSW

Prior to COVID-19, I was a fee-for-service therapist in an outpatient setting. My agency was a for-profit, medicaid-financed agency with some private insurance access. In that setting I spent my hours seeing clients, one after the other, for 45–50 minutes and writing notes in between. There’s a lot of paperwork, treatment plans, and billing procedures. While you are paid hourly, it’s very difficult to get compensation if a client presents other needs that require a referral, phone time with other providers, interacting with the legal system, or problems with child protection systems. The agency offers marketing, which brings in clients, and processes billing. They monitor regulations and procedural expectations set by the state and other payers. Otherwise, you practice as if you are in private practice, and because agencies can be, quite honestly, cheap, you might need to procure your own training and supervision.

**I check my
email frequently
throughout the day
and have to attend
weekly meetings**

**The therapist needs
to have a self-care
plan in place**

Naturally, the system can kick the joy out of the therapist's work because it's difficult to take care of oneself under so much stress. The goal of the agency was to make money. As long as the therapist understands this and is clear about their own goals, this partnership can work. However, the therapist needs to have a self-care plan in place because few agencies will provide a trauma-informed work space.

As consolation for all this, I will admit that some positions will offer more creativity in therapeutic methods and outcomes. I have had positions in the past where I was able to provide group therapy sessions, art therapy, and psychoeducation, etc. Oftentimes funding for expanded treatment is contingent upon the size of the agency or if there are more private funding streams such as grants and donations. I still prefer working for a non-profit over a for-profit agency because while these agencies are poorer and don't offer the therapist much more in compensation, they seem to be more client focused.

– Michelle Warner Hyde, MS, CAADC

Summary

- ▶ Many of the therapists work in private practice, where they see between 20 and 50 clients per week. These therapists enjoy a flexible schedule, scheduling clients at convenient hours and working anywhere from three to five days per week. They take different approaches to the business, with some leaving space for walk-ins and others packing their schedules full.
- ▶ During the hours that they are not seeing clients, these private practice therapists engage in business activities such as billing, marketing, and documenting. They may also coordinate care with other medical providers.
- ▶ Several of the therapists work in school settings, such as university counseling centers, Catholic schools, or high schools.
- ▶ Many of the therapists hold several part-time jobs. They may simultaneously own their own practice, work at an inpatient center, and teach at a university. This shows both that the therapist's skillset translates into a variety of settings, and that therapists are not limited to having just one role at a time.
- ▶ Some of the senior therapists engage in mentorship activities, such as supervision, through which they help young therapists to hone their clinical skills. These senior therapists also engage in supervision or their own, showing that therapists can benefit from mentorship at any point during their careers.
- ▶ Several of the therapists work in outpatient settings focusing on specific issues such as substance use. These therapists fill a variety of roles, including acting as an individual therapist and running group therapy sessions.
- ▶ One therapist in this group owns a business outside of a private practice; in this case, a business that coordinates employee mental health services for a variety of businesses and insurance providers. This shows that therapists are not limited to private practice when it comes to entrepreneurial pursuits.

What does it take to be a great therapist?

Many have what it takes to be a therapist – credentials and training, a place to practice, and a list of clients – but there are factors that set great therapists apart. The responses that follow illuminate these qualities and can help shape your therapy journey, whether as an aspiring therapist, or a potential client seeking a transformative experience.

I believe empathy is at the top of the list for what it takes to be a great therapist. You have to be able to understand how others are feeling and understand why they make the choices they do. Having empathy also brings patience in my experience. Patience is also very important! We are working with people, and that brings its challenges.

You have to be able to understand how others are feeling

Cultural competency and openness to new experiences are incredibly important. We are not immune to biases and judgments. It is very important that we are aware of our implicit biases and expand our education to include our clients' cultures and experiences. This can help build the relationship with the client and make them feel more comfortable.

– Caroline Kuttler, MS, LPC

A curious mind is probably the number one thing it takes to be a great therapist. A curious mind will always seek to ask more questions, build a better rapport, and really experience empathy for a client. A curious mind will stay open to possibilities rather than get locked into one conceptualization or diagnosis, because the therapist will always be looking for more information to confirm or disprove a given diagnosis. A curious mind will always be looking for new research or new methodologies coming out to learn what is proven to work best for and with clients, and not be satisfied with whatever learning happened during school. A curious mind will have what Rollo May, [the influential existential therapist], called “a disciplined naivete” when learning about a client that blends warmth with a slight bit of skepticism so the therapist and client together can figure out the reality of a situation and not just the truth the client has experienced.

A curious mind creates therapy that is [...] absolutely life changing

Good therapists will all have some degree of empathy, concern, warmth, knowledge, and desire for great relationships, but the truly great therapists [...] have [...] all had curious minds. True

curiosity precludes any kind of judgmental thoughts since judgments assume answers, and curiosity is about seeking answers and meaning. Curiosity goes hand in hand with empathy, since seeking to discover the meanings, the goals, and assumptions behind any kind of behavior means that you will find a pattern where it makes sense for that client. That doesn't mean you agree with the action, but it becomes understandable, and that is what so many clients are looking for: someone who can understand why they do things, especially actions they don't like doing (like substance abuse or self-harm). A curious mind creates therapy that is not only helpful, but absolutely life changing.

– Patrick R. Hoolahan, PsyD

There are specific qualities that help a therapist be a great provider to clients, and such qualities include being warm, empathetic, compassionate, flexible, intuitive, intelligent, and more. A great therapist continues to be curious about the client throughout the therapeutic relationship. A great therapist can effectively balance recognizing the strength and resilience of their clients while holding them accountable.

A great therapist is humble

A therapist should be able to hold uncomfortable conversations with clients and be comfortable with awkward silence in the therapy room. A great therapist uses their experience and intuition to provide personalized service in specific moments and continues to be aware of the moment-to-moment experiences in the therapy room. A great therapist is also humble and continues to expand their knowledge and utilize consultation to grow professionally. A great therapist utilizes therapy in their personal life to manage stress and other issues before it impacts their professional identity.

– Naeema Akter, PsyD

Developing an authentic voice as a therapist is paramount to becoming a great and effective therapist. New practitioners often experience “impostor syndrome” while training as a therapist. It is important to work on fostering a style that feels true to yourself in order to genuinely connect with your clients. Having good boundaries, knowing your limits, and practicing good self-care [are] necessary to be fully present in your work.

Work on fostering a style that feels true to yourself

– Sari Fleischman, PsyD

First and foremost, being a great therapist takes being in long-term psychotherapy oneself. Self-awareness, self-acceptance, humility, ongoing supervision or consultation, and continuing education are essential. Moreover, understanding how the multiple systems of oppression in which we all live (e.g., gender, sexual orientation, race, class) intersect in order to shape the psyches of both therapist and client is essential. Being a psychotherapy client as well as a psychotherapist involves a commitment to being uncomfortable. Change doesn't occur when we are too comfortable. Knowing how to develop a secure base of connection with the client in order to withstand the inevitable and necessary discomfort is essential.

– Dennis Debiak, PsyD

To be a great therapist, you have to remember that the client is the expert on their own mind. It can be tempting to advise the client or give them “answers”; however, I think patience helps the client understand themselves better and helps us better understand the client's needs. I also think a great therapist is open minded, controlling the biases that we all inevitably have and not letting them creep into therapy.

**Change doesn't
occur when we are
too comfortable**

– Karishma Lalchandani, PsyD

I think that becoming a therapist is a process that continues throughout one's career; in other words, we only get better at our craft with time, as long as we invest in our ongoing personal and professional development. Simply completing a degree program or studying a specific treatment doesn't render one a great therapist. Being a great therapist requires maintaining curiosity about oneself and one's patients. It means giving up a quest to arrive at expertise and instead trying to develop expertise in not knowing, in questioning and uncertainty. There is no room in psychotherapy for a therapist who is an expert in living; instead, great therapists accept the limits of what they understand and thus collaborate with their patients to build understanding and insight together.

**Patience helps the
client understand
themselves better**

– Anonymous

**Great therapists
accept the limits
of what they
understand**

From my perspective, a great therapist is strength based and not deficit based. Appreciative inquiry is at the foundation of being a good therapist. We need to hear what our clients are saying and reflect back to them the strengths that we see in their behavior and actions.

A great therapist is the last one to tell you that they're a great therapist. There is something very humbling about working with people who are suffering or seeing someone smile after dealing with trauma. This does represent the work of a good therapist, but really, it reflects the hard work of a client. Being a good-enough therapist means that we can make mistakes, and we can learn and grow from them.

– Elizabeth K. Misener, PhD

Great therapists are attentive to changes in both the client and the therapeutic alliance. They attend to their own psychological wellbeing and life balance. They are a calming and supportive presence. They re-calibrate and improve their empathic accuracy often. They are life-long learners, who enlarge their theoretical orientation over time. They develop a mindset of growth and improve themselves through having an open feedback system with clients.

**[Great therapists]
attend to their
own psychological
wellbeing and life
balance**

– Harvey Hillin, PhD

Strong relationships with trusted colleagues. Crisis management skills and an internal sense of ethics are bolstered by peers who can help you through difficult moments in a treatment [session]. Developing a full life outside of work is also extremely important.

**Developing a full
life outside of work
is also extremely
important**

– Jason Holloway, PsyD

A great therapist has the patience to support the client while they work out the issues in their life. Change is hard, and it takes time. It is especially difficult to change our lives around things that are emotionally charged, as most of the topics we work with in therapy are.

A great therapist has a sense of curiosity. Being a therapist is not about telling people what they should do. It is about helping the client explore their life and find the answers within themselves. A therapist brings to their work a sense of curiosity about what makes this client who they are. Being curious means asking more questions than giving answers.

– Jacqueline Julien, PsyD, LP

Patience, a sense of humor and probably foremost, a deep sense of curiosity about each person who comes through the door.

– John Burns, LCSW

My first advice to anyone thinking about pursuing a career in counseling is to work with a therapist and learn what it is like to sit on the other side of the chair. Equally important is to continue this process through a healthy self-care routine.

In addition, a great therapist will build trust and create a safe environment that allows the client to share. Adapting to the needs of each individual client and really meeting them where they are is critical. Just as you have done your work, let the client do theirs, hold space for them, find a balance that allows them to feel empowered by the process.

– Rosemary Huber, LPC

**It is especially
difficult to change
our lives around
things that are
emotionally charged**

A sense of humor

**A great therapist
will build trust
and create a safe
environment**

[Donald] Winnicott, [the influential pediatrician and psychoanalyst], reminded us we do not need great parents, but one good-enough parent. Perhaps it is more accurate to speak of therapists in the same way. Nevertheless, there do seem to be therapists who are rarer and more exceptional than others. The exceptional therapist is skilled in basic core duties but goes beyond them. [They love] doing the work and feel called to it, in the sense of feeling individuated on this path. [They have] enough experience, both in life and in doing psychotherapy, to have amassed some wisdom and are able to pass that along. [They are] authentic, humbled, honored to do this work, and respectful of the wonders of the psyche.

This “special” therapist is actually an artist, having some natural and creative skills that have been honed through years of study and practice. This person is also knowledgeable about scientific theory, the history of the field, and has some familiarity with broader, related disciplines such as philosophy, literature, and culture. Rather than adhering to a “one-size-fits-all” approach, this therapist modifies treatment to fit the moment and picks up on subtle cues, like a movement or verbal expression. This therapist may switch in and out of many roles including but not limited to educator, philosopher, mirror, nourishing parent, realistic confronter, guide, passive listener, etc. [They are] not afraid to try an informed hunch about what may be called for in the moment.

The exceptional therapist works with conscious as well as unconscious processes, with behavior and cognitions but also with transference, dreams and images, the amplification of themes, and utilizes a variety of interventions as appropriate. They can help change or enhance perspective, make the dark side more visible, and form connections between individual suffering and the broader human experience. This therapist can get out of the way of their own issues and follow the patient’s unique path.

The “great” therapists know that they will never become their ideal selves, professionally or personally, but they continue developing and learning from their patients and from their own internal processes. Moreover, they seek consultation when they suspect they have lost objectivity or are trapped in a transference.

**The “great” therapists
know that they
will never become
their ideal selves,
professionally or
personally, but they
continue developing
and learning**

– Marion Rudin Frank, EdD, MA

I believe that great therapists are able to be humble.

We can't help others from a place of authority. Clients often look for answers and authority from their therapist. In the beginning, this can appeal to a young therapist's ego, even though we have been warned against it in school. We often don't see the real trap until it's too late.

Giving advice, guiding in the form of leading, and rewarding clients for making choices that we ourselves feel are the best choices lead to using power where it doesn't belong. It's acceptable to offer ideas, options, and tools while supporting the client in making their own choices. But, when choices become a contingency for the therapeutic relationship, we've lost our humbleness, and the client has lost the sanctity of [their] free will. This can be extremely damaging for the client.

With this said, The difference between an average or poor therapist and a great therapist is the ability of the therapist to work on [their] own issues. Only when we recognize our own strengths and weaknesses can we help another. And that process should ultimately be humbling.

Only when we
recognize our own
strengths and
weaknesses can we
help another

– Michelle Warner Hyde, MS, CAADC

Summary

- ▶ Great therapists have knowledge of technique and theory, acquired through years of training. They have self-awareness and intuition which they acquire through years of experience.
- ▶ Boundless curiosity turns therapists into lifelong learners. They continue to educate themselves academically, while remaining humble enough to learn from clients.
- ▶ Great therapists act with respect and dignity, recognizing their clients as intelligent individuals with many strengths.
- ▶ Flexibility is an essential aspect of great therapy. Great therapists know how to respond to clients and customize their approach accordingly.
- ▶ Great therapists commit to taking care of themselves. They tend to their own mental health with the same energy they ask of their clients.
- ▶ Maintaining a balance of warmth, authenticity, and professionalism helps clients feel safe and engaged in treatment.
- ▶ Therapy does not always unfold linearly. Great therapists are patient, willing to let the relationship develop.
- ▶ Great therapists hold clients accountable for working towards the goals.
- ▶ Confidence is key. Great therapists exude confidence that they can help, letting clients know they are in good hands.
- ▶ Training in multiple modalities allows therapists to understand their clients from different perspectives.
- ▶ Great therapists are culturally competent and willing to explore how societal factors affect the client's life.

What has helped you most in your therapist training?

We wanted to include some information about training for those who are working towards becoming fully qualified therapists. The following advice highlights both information and experiences you may want to seek out in your own training.

Peer and supervisor support has been a great deal of help. Having social support throughout the training process to help validate my experiences and guide me through challenges was, and continues to be, incredibly helpful.

Having different jobs in different areas of the field has been very helpful. I started out working in the substance abuse/addiction field (both inpatient and outpatient) and then moved to more general outpatient. I had so many different, invaluable experiences from all of these jobs, and I think that has really shaped me as the therapist I am today.

Having different jobs in different areas of the field

– Caroline Kuttler, MS, LPC

Honestly, there are two things, one internal and one external. Internally, having resilience and being willing to be shaped by others, but not lose myself, has been such a growth factor for me. Knowing who I was before I started training and being able to know I am still who I want to be, but being able to change everything I had been doing has been incredibly helpful.

Supervisors who were willing to really get into the details of work and challenge, but not berate, me

Externally, [it was valuable to have] the right training focused on both grander ideals, with things like what it means to be a therapist and what the goal of therapy is, combined with supervisors who were willing to really get into the details of work and challenge, but not berate, me. I have had great supervisors where I looked forward to reviewing audiotape or video so I could see what I had done right and where something else might be more effective. I've also had terrible supervisors where everything was punished and growth was not rewarded, so I learned to tread water rather than take risks and get better.

Getting into the details of the work, even down to the minutiae of specific wording, gestures, and body language, can be really helpful when done in a supportive and curious manner. Sadly, some of my worst experiences in supervision were when those moments were used as points of judgment rather than growth.

– Patrick R. Hoolahan, PsyD

The one thing that helped me the most in my therapist training (as well as life in general) is being flexible. I went into my doctoral program planning on becoming a neuropsychologist, and almost halfway through my academic career, I realized I enjoyed psychotherapy more than assessment. I continue to realize that certain expectations and plans I have initially for myself are subject to change, and along the way, I may find that I enjoy something else. Being curious about my interests and listening to what I want have helped me the most in my training and to be a better therapist. As cliché as it sounds, I've found it in my best interest to pursue what I was most passionate about, and it has helped me to follow my dreams.

– Naeema Akter, PsyD

Peer consultation and supervision have been the most beneficial. It has helped me to gain perspective and think critically about my work. Sometimes being a therapist can be very isolating. Developing connections and relationships with other therapists I trust and respect has made all the difference. It has also helped to engage in a theoretical stance that is a good fit for my personality. While it is wise to be skilled and knowledgeable about various theories and modalities, it has been helpful to engage more deeply in a perspective that feels like a good fit for me to help develop my therapeutic voice.

– Sari Fleischman, PsyD

I've worked with a variety of clients in different settings. I think this exposure to different populations helped me understand how to work with different age groups, personalities, and presenting challenges.

Listening to what I want

Developing connections and relationships with other therapists I trust and respect

I think working with individuals with addictions was the most beneficial experience of my training. Although it was challenging, I learned how to be more direct, hold my own boundaries, and teach others how to hold their boundaries. Substance use is often comorbid with other diagnoses, and I now feel confident that I can help my clients who struggle with this outside of a recovery clinic. Processing difficult situations with other clinicians, either in supervision or peer consultation, helped to normalize my own feelings as a therapist. I appreciate that I was trained to be aware of my countertransference so that I can use it to help treatment with a client instead of hinder it.

Working with individuals with addictions was the most beneficial experience of my training

– Karishma Lalchandani, PsyD

Without question the most important piece of my training as a therapist has been my own personal, intensive psychotherapy. In my case, it's been an ongoing psychoanalysis, which has been incalculably valuable to me both personally and professionally. Being a therapist requires emotional stamina and self-understanding; these are qualities that our own psychotherapies profoundly develop and support.

My own personal, intensive psychotherapy

A second important support of my training is maintaining a long-term relationship with a supervisor. Brief supervisions can be helpful and instructive, but a long-term supervisory relationship is incredibly valuable in helping a therapist learn more both about their own patterns of interacting with patients and why certain patients tend to be more challenging for us than others.

– Anonymous

Being able to see great therapists at work (live or by video) as role models. Practicing with clients and receiving feedback, especially (when possible) video-replay feedback. If something isn't working, being adaptive enough to try something else.

Practicing with clients and receiving feedback

– Harvey Hillin, PhD

When done right, supervision is the best place to conceptualize patients and understand aspects of the treatment that are not visible to you in-session or on your own. Supervisors add insight and notice countertransferences that you as a therapist may not have noticed. A close second is my own psychotherapy. And a close third are my relationships with peers in the field.

– Jason Holloway, PsyD

Supervision

What has helped me most in my training is learning that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to working with people. As an example, we know that everyone should get some form of exercise, yet exercise looks different for every person; some people like to play sports, other people like to do yoga. The same can be said for therapy. While a therapist may be working on changing all of their clients' negative thought patterns, the thoughts and how to approach changing them may be different. As a therapist, you can't go in expecting that you can follow some kind of script with each client. There will always be variations because you are working with humans, and while humans have commonalities, each individual has their own strengths and weaknesses.

– Dr. Jacqueline Julien, PsyD, LP

There is no one-size-fits-all approach

Developing a network of mentors and colleagues I can call on, and who call on me, to discuss cases, to get unstuck, or to get another point of view.

– John Burns, LCSW

A network of mentors and colleagues

I learned a lot by attending conferences where I could watch other therapists work. Reading good books with cool ideas has also been an important part of my training. I've also learned interesting ideas from other places such as Alcoholics Anonymous or TED Talks.

I've also been helped by supportive supervision. One of my first supervisors told me this gem: "When you are in a session, say half of the things you want to say." I used to tape my sessions and listen to them and ask myself, "Why did you say that?" I want everything I say to be purposeful.

When you are in a session, say half of the things you want to say

I incorporate concepts from these resources in my sessions and keep those that fit my style and seem to help the client.

– Jeanie Hebert-Brown, LCSW

The most important thing is to never stop learning. Collaborate, take workshops, read books, listen to podcasts, surround yourself with like-minded people. Find a work-life balance for you and your family.

Never stop learning

One of my first supervisors told me to make sure and always take a lunch break, step away from the office, go for a quick walk, have a healthy snack, a glass of water, give yourself a reset. You cannot be at your best helping others and encouraging their self-care if you are not doing the same for yourself. The best thing you can do is lead by example.

– Rosemary Huber, LPC

Most of my training at this point in my career has been outside of the university setting. Looking back, I acquired substantial training in family therapy, gestalt therapy, feminist theory, rational emotive/cognitive therapy, transactional analysis, hypnotherapy, psychodrama, addictions work, and assertive training. For the past 25 years, the bulk of my learning has been gleaned from the work of Carl Jung, whose theory is particularly intriguing to me because it has such depth and breadth that one can never reach the end of its content or implications. Such is also true of psychology. I have traveled to Zurich, India, and within the U.S. to study his philosophy. I plan to continue to do so.

Everything I have studied brings growth to me personally

Every psychological discipline has its devotees, and many believe it is only their approach [that] is the best and most effective way to work. In my 40+ years as a psychologist, I am aware that everything I have studied brings growth to me personally and to my work with others. One develops an individualized way of working over time, integrating mentors and theories and training into a unique methodology. The underlying result of being exposed to a variety of teachers is the ingestion of many resources and the confidence that comes from standing on many broad shoulders.

– Dr. Marion Rudin Frank, EdD, MA

The actual work with real clients is the most valuable training, [with] quality placements for fieldwork [and/or] internships. By “quality,” I mean that you have a thoughtful, experienced, dedicated supervisor who will spend enough time with you.

A wide variety of field placements

It is also important that the location of the placement provides access to a wide variety of people and situations to give you a taste of what can happen during the time you're under close supervision. Managing a crisis, working with an uncooperative or belligerent client, and even observing an experienced therapist in action are all very valuable in preparing you for the “real world.”

– Marcia Hanlon, LCSW

Summary

Contributor's responses can be grouped into two categories: *external experiences* and *internal experiences*.

▶ External experiences

- ▶ Through their training, therapists become experts at listening to and learning from others. They practice this skill with clients, but also with each other through supervision, mentorship, and peer consultation.
- ▶ Therapists examine their own work in detail. They often record therapy sessions, reviewing them with supervisors or in a classroom setting. Students also analyze videotape of expert therapists, emulating aspects of their approach in their own work. Through this process therapists can get an outside perspective and fine tune the details of their practice.
- ▶ Some of our contributors believe it best to pick one approach and become an expert in it. Others are eclectic, learning and combining different theories. The former approach allows therapists to dig deep into their clients' problem, but only from one perspective. The latter facilitates flexible treatment, but may suffer from a lack of depth. Training programs often reflect this divide: some offer training in many theories, others in just one.
- ▶ Having hands-on experiences in a variety of different settings, with a diverse array of clients is an invaluable part of any clinical training program.
- ▶ Developing a supportive network of peers and mentors helps students survive training while getting the most out of it.

▶ Internal experiences

- ▶ Trainees must be open to being molded, yet resilient enough to stay true to themselves. Therapists use their personalities in their work, and authenticity goes a long way in building client relationships. New therapists must be open to trying new ways of thinking without losing what makes them unique.
- ▶ Training involves following one's passion, and changing course when something doesn't feel right. Many therapists start training thinking they want to do one thing but fall in love with another. Having flexibility to pivot from one interest to the next helps the trainee find their niche.
- ▶ Self-discovery is a big part of clinical training. Trainees generate self-knowledge by analyzing and understanding their emotional reactions to patients.
- ▶ Since training can be demanding, learning how to set healthy boundaries is essential.
- ▶ Not all learning happens in the classroom: it's important to be open to unexpected lessons.

Is there anything else you'd like to share?

In this section we invited the therapists to let their minds wander and share whatever they felt most important for you to understand. What follows is a compilation of ideas about what it takes to be a great therapist.

Self-care is so important. Take time for yourself, first and foremost. Take breaks when you need to, and reach out to others when you are feeling overwhelmed. We absorb so much every day, and it's important to not let it build up.

– Caroline Kuttler, MS, LPC

Take time for yourself, first and foremost

Figure out who you are, what you want to do, and who you want to be before going too much further. There are lots of different roles for psychologists, and the numbers are growing daily. Psychology can be what we make it, and you have to decide who you are in that. Every psychologist has to find their own niche, and we do our best work when we are focused and love the niche we have picked. Not every psychologist is good at all things in psychology, and we aren't meant to be. No one is good at everything, so claim your expertise and shine in that.

Find your groove

Don't be afraid to take risks, but make sure you're in an environment that allows for that. We get caught up trying to be perfect, when better should be our goal. We say this to our clients, but we have to take it to heart. Find your groove, but don't be afraid to try out a few grooves before finding your own.

Remember, when you are treating a client, you are the doctor, and odds are you know them best out of every other health professional treating them. If you know something isn't working for a client, change it. If another health professional, such as a physician or nurse, is doing something your expertise tells you isn't working, work with that provider to change it. Don't lord your status over people, and don't let them feel lesser because of who you are.

– Patrick R. Hoolahan, PsyD

Utilize your connections, and if your network is lacking in therapists, join listservs, attend lectures, and find someone to mentor you. Most people will help you, but you need to ask them to receive assistance. Be proactive about learning and growing, and chase your passion.

– Naeema Akter, PsyD

It's easy to feel as though you know so little in a field that has so much information. I think it's important to remind ourselves that we are experts at what we are doing even when we feel like we aren't. I'd encourage aspiring therapists to try therapy for themselves if they have access to it. To know what it's like to be in the other chair is a powerful tool. Additionally, I'd encourage aspiring therapists to consider their own personalities when determining how they would like to practice, in terms of setting and orientation. I'd also like to add that the hardest part in therapy for me is not deciding what to say but deciding what *not* to say. It's natural for our minds to make comments and important for us to only share these comments when they are in service of the client.

– Karishma Lalchandani, PsyD

I think beginning therapists tend to think they are learning how to perform “operations” on a patient that will bring change to a patient's life. In one sense, this could be thought of as a fair description of what doing psychotherapy involves. In another sense, though, this idea is somewhat fallacious. People have the most opportunity for growth and change when therapists focus their efforts on establishing the necessary environmental conditions for change. That is, patients need a relationship that permits the expression of their innermost, deepest, and most private thoughts and feelings with the aim to collaborate in understanding what these expressions mean for their overall life. Beginning therapists often feel anxious, I think, about what they should do or say to a patient; instead, the question really needs to be, how can I relax enough to simply just be with the patient and have an intimate conversation with them?

– Anonymous

Most people will help you, but you need to ask

To know what it's like to be in the other chair

Relax enough to simply be with the patient

Supporting clients on their journey to self discovery, empowerment, and wellbeing is one of the most rewarding careers you can have. But if you are trying to fix people, this is not the profession for you. As therapists, we need to learn to sit with people's anguish and witness their stories and struggles. This can be a real challenge to aspiring therapists. I think it's important to incorporate a strength-based approach and to be aware of character strengths as [the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (an online character strengths assessment)] defines them, as it gives the language for the therapist and client to use in understanding strengths and problem areas. Continue to learn and connect with other professionals.

– Elizabeth K. Misener, PhD

The advice I would give to aspiring therapists is that they do not need to have all the answers. When we decide to become therapists, it is often because we want to help people. It may seem like you have to fix what is wrong in a client's life. That is not the case. It is up to the client to change the patterns in their life. What helps people the most is listening to them and helping them find their own best solutions.

– Jacqueline Julien, PsyD, LP

I would say not to neglect your life outside of your profession and to have as many diverse experiences as you can. Besides helping to renew and recharge, I've found I tend to learn more about myself and others when I get outside my comfort zone for a while.

– John Burns, LCSW

We should find mentors and role models, most of whom may never know how much we learned from them and how grateful we have become. Psychology is very broad and covers a wide spectrum of thought and strategy. The more you know about what is on that spectrum, the easier it is to develop yourself and emerge with your own unique and effective style. Continuing education is essential; continuing consultation is essential.

**If you are trying to
fix people, this is
not the profession
for you**

**It is up to the
client to change [...]
their life**

**Have as many
diverse experiences
as you can**

If you do not find people fascinating, and if you do not love the work, do not do it. Do not be a clinician. Find and do what you love instead. A career in psychology is often a winding road, perhaps for years, until you settle in. Psychology itself changes over the years, with different orientations becoming formulated and gaining in popularity. Try things that may appeal to you. Learn what suits you and what does not.

Learn what suits you and what does not

You may find another niche within the field of psychology as a researcher, statistician, academic lecturer, or organizational consultant. You may discover that forensic work or testing or mediation is more to your liking. Today you may work with managed care, but you may decide to work without it later in your career. As a clinician, you may want to work alone, with a group, or start your own company. Or, you may decide on an entirely different field.

Be aware if you are approaching burnout and take time off, go on a retreat, nourish yourself somehow, learn something new. Clinical work is a rewarding but challenging career. If it is your dream, do not be afraid to start a private practice. All you need is a simple office, a couple of chairs, a desire to do meaningful work with people, and a sense that this is your path.

– Marion Rudin Frank, EdD, MA

Practicing therapy takes up so much more of your cognitive and emotional bandwidth than most other professions. It's essential to know and understand yourself well, through your own therapy, in order to put yourself aside and be there for the clients. As I sometimes say to my clients, when my office door closes, my 'stuff' stays outside of the door. I am there to focus on them. My job is to do the best I can to understand what it's like to be them in this world, while also acknowledging our differences.

Know and understand yourself

I believe that is the huge gift we give our clients: that we enter a therapy session totally focused on them. And then, be able to draw from our knowledge base and analytical skills to figure out what the problem is and how we need to address it.

Building rapport is key to earning trust so that the therapist can be honest and ask the probing questions a client needs to respond to in order to grow. Therapy is not always fun or pleasant, but if the client trusts you, you can take them through the dark or uncomfortable stuff with the goal of seeing brightness and hope for their future.

I've seen this time and time again with hundreds of clients. It can be frustrating, annoying, sad, and overwhelming at times along the way, but a therapist's commitment to see the client through is almost magical and is so worth it, for both the client and the therapist.

– Marcia Hanlon, LCSW

Summary

- ▶ A fascination with people is a prerequisite for being a good clinician. There are other areas of psychology for those who do not have this quality.
- ▶ Finding your niche is a process that takes time. Try things that you find attractive, and do not force yourself to do what does not suit you.
- ▶ Building a network requires being proactive. People are generous and will help, but you need to ask them first.
- ▶ Many of the therapists emphasize supervision, consultation, and therapy, not just in training, but for the duration of your career.
- ▶ Learn how to relax in the therapy room, and treat each session like an intimate conversation.
- ▶ It is challenging to sit with anguish and pain, but this is often the work of the therapist.
- ▶ Psychotherapy is a collaborative effort between many parties, extending beyond the therapist/client dyad.
- ▶ Pay attention to the warning signs that arise within you. Self-awareness is vital because if you are approaching burnout, you can take preemptive action.
- ▶ You do not need to have all the answers. You do not need to fix people.

What is the most valuable therapy resource you would recommend to readers?

We asked therapists about the resources that they find most valuable. Any of the following books or other suggested resources will help to further shape your ideas about therapy.

It is a very well-known book but for good reason: *The Body Keeps the Score* by Bessel van der Kolk. This is a great book for therapists interested in trauma and stress. Also, *The Deepest Well: Healing Long-Term Effects of Childhood Adversity* by Nadine Burke Harris. This is a book written by the California Surgeon General and explores more trauma.

– Caroline Kuttler, MS, LPC

Since I work with my patients' dreams, I find the *Book of Symbols: Reflections of Archetypal Images*, published by Taschen, to be one of my most valuable resources. Also, it is simply a very beautiful book.

– Marion Rudin Frank, EdD, MA

Schopenhauer's Porcupines: Intimacy and Its Dilemmas by Deborah Anna Luepnitz.

– Dennis Debiak, PsyD

I have four that I regularly go to:

1. The Social Work Podcast by Jonathan Singer, PhD, LCSW
2. Therapist Aid: <https://www.therapistaid.com/>
3. PositivePsychology.com: <https://positivepsychology.com/positive-psychology-interventions>
4. *The Four Agreements: A Practical Guide to Personal Freedom* by Don Miguel Ruiz

– Elizabeth K. Misener, PhD

I would start with viewing the great therapists, most of which can be found via psychotherapy and counseling videos: www.psychotherapy.net.

Special access is needed to get DVDs of Milton Erickson, and some of the best Virginia Satir videos are from Golden Triad Films in Kansas City.

Some of the best “fast demonstrations” for relief of anxiety and [post-traumatic stress disorder] are available for free on YouTube just by searching for Steve Andreas (he died in November of 2019).

For a light and fresh approach to depression, the classic book *The Situation Is Hopeless, But Not Serious* by Paul Watzlawick is a good read.

– Harvey Hillin, PhD

Given my own existential background, if I had to pick one book, it would be *Man's Search for Meaning* by Viktor Frankl. It lays out the suffering of one person in the Holocaust – the author's horrible experiences at Auschwitz – and shows the power that helping others psychologically can have on us. It demonstrates the power of therapy not just for the client, but also for the therapist, and how meaningful that can be in one's life.

– Patrick R. Hoolahan, PsyD

When I was in graduate school, Brené Brown's books had not yet been published. I hope they are required reading now! Her ability to connect with people is amazing and no matter what media she is a part of, TED Talks, podcasts, audio books, printed books, she will reach you! I first heard her TED Talk and was immediately drawn to her quote from Theodore Roosevelt's ‘The Man in the Arena’ speech:

“It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.”

After hearing her TED Talk, I read *Daring Greatly*, and as a direct result, I could see my confidence grow. I learned to focus on what I could control, the relationships with my students and clients, and I showed up! We are never too old to learn, to reflect, to change, but none of that can happen if we don't get uncomfortable and show up. It is important to always learn and challenge yourself, just as we expect our clients to. I cannot say this enough: do your own work, and never stop!

– Rosemary Huber, LPC

I can't limit it to one resource other than to be generally curious about the state of the art and not limit yourself to one theory or method.

We work primarily with trauma, so that focus is reflected here, but all therapists benefit from being “trauma informed.”

▶ **Podcasts:**

- ▶ The Science of Psychotherapy Podcast – Brief interviews with thought leaders in the field
- ▶ The Trauma Therapist Podcast – Similar format with special focus on trauma
- ▶ Very Bad Therapy – Told from the client's perspective (frequently humbling!)

▶ **Books on Trauma:**

- ▶ *The Polyvagal Theory: Neurophysiological Foundations of Emotions, Attachment, Communication, and Self-Regulation* by Stephen Porges – Helps to make sense of how and why trauma affects the individual
- ▶ *EMDR and Dissociation: The Progressive Approach* by Annabel Gonzalez and Delores Mosquera – Expansion of Eye movement desensitization and reprocessing, [a type of psychotherapy in which the patient attends to an emotionally disturbing experience while focusing on an external stimulus, usually therapist directed lateral eye movements], from a procedure to a theory of psychotherapy and change.

▶ **Books About What Works:**

- ▶ *The Heroic Client* by Barry Duncan, Scott Miller, and Jacqueline Sparks – Useful “how-to” approach to measuring and improving outcomes

► Books About My Theoretical Perspective

- *Uncommon Therapy: The Psychiatric Techniques of Milton H. Erickson, MD* by Jay Haley
 - Dated now but a good introduction to Erickson and not being tied to any one theory or method
- *Ericksonian Methods: The Essence of the Story* – Various authors discuss how they apply Erickson's ideas for disparate clinical issues

– John Burns, LCSW

I do research when a client brings an issue that I'm not familiar with or have not had much experience working with. I rely on professional/research journal articles primarily. As is taught to us early on in college, the source credibility of the authors is the most important feature to examine when choosing what to read. That holds true for continuing education workshops I attend as well. To maintain my license in my state, I have to complete a number of continuing education units every two years. I tend to look for workshops sponsored by universities or teaching hospitals because those are usually more scrutinized for quality.

A book of essays that are interesting and instructional is *Voices from the Field: Defining Moments in Counselor and Therapist Development*, edited by Michelle Trotter-Mathison, et al. (2010). I contributed an essay to the section, "The Senior Professional Phase," so I know how much care the editors took with the writers. The essays delve into a lot of real-world experience of therapists.

– Marcia Hanlon, LCSW

I would say the most valuable resources for me have been the book *The Heart and Soul of Change: Delivering What Works in Therapy* by Duncan, Miller, Wampold, and Hubble. This book has helped me understand how clients think about therapy and how they move through the therapeutic process. Also, the PositivePsychology.com blog has been so valuable helping with ideas for specific issues.

– Jacqueline Julien, PsyD, LP

Afterword

Thank you for your support and for taking the time to read this piece. Our questions, although vague and open ended, evoked a remarkable number of commonalities in our contributors' responses. For instance, many contributors believe that in order to make it as a therapist, you must have a curious mind. Curiosity came up in all forms: about the field, about yourself, about your client, about human nature. The contributors also sang the virtues of education, both as a necessary component of becoming qualified and as an essential, lifelong pursuit. They attribute their expertise to having diverse clinical experiences, giving them the ability to help clients with many things. Most contributors mentioned good supervision as an essential factor in their professional growth. These are just a few of the threads that bind our therapist's responses together.

If reading this has peaked your interest, consider reading our ebook: *On Becoming A Therapist*, a guidebook for becoming the kind of therapist you want to be. The ebook is written for all audiences, from those convinced they were born to be therapists, to those learning about therapy for the first time. The book is laid out in stepwise fashion, helping you envision and navigate your professional journey from start to finish.

Mentorship and peer support are some of the most treasured aspects of therapy. This is certainly true in my experience. I would like to personally thank all of our contributors again for the energy they put into this project. I am sure that the knowledge compiled here will benefit and empower therapists for generations to come.

References

- Burke Harris, N. (2018). *The deepest well: Healing the long-term effects of childhood adversity*. HMH Books.
- Brown, B. (2012). *Daring greatly: How the courage to be vulnerable transforms the way we live, love, parent, and lead*. Gotham Books.
- Duncan, B. L., Miller, S. D., & Sparks, J. A. (2004). *The Heroic Client: A Revolutionary Way to Improve Effectiveness Through Client-Directed, Outcome-Informed Therapy*. Jossey-Bass.
- Frankl, V. E. (1962). *Man's search for meaning: An introduction to logotherapy*. Beacon Press.
- Gonzales, A., & Mosquera, D. (2012). *EMDR and dissociation: The progressive approach*. A.I. Books.
- Haley, J. (1973). *Uncommon therapy: The psychiatric techniques of Milton H. Erickson, M.D.* Norton.
- Duncan, B. L., Miller, S. D., Wampold, B. E., & Hubble, M. A. (Eds.). (2010). *The heart and soul of change: Delivering what works in therapy* (2nd ed.). American Psychological Association.
- Luepnitz, D. A. (2003). *Schopenhauer's porcupines: Intimacy and its dilemmas: Five stories of psychotherapy*. Basic Books.
- Porges, S. W. (2011). *The polyvagal theory: Neurophysiological foundations of emotions, attachment, communication, and self-regulation*. W. W. Norton.
- Ruiz, D. M. (2000). *The four agreements: A practical guide to personal freedom*. Amber-Allen Publishing.
- Ronnberg, A., Martin, K., & Archive for Research in Archetypal Symbolism. (2010). *The book of symbols: Reflections on archetypal images*. Taschen.
- Trotter-Mathison, M., Koch, J. M., Sanger, S., & Skovholt, T. M. (Eds.). (2010). *Voices from the field: Defining moments in counselor and therapist development*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
- Van der Kolk, B. A. (2014). *The body keeps the score: Brain, mind, and body in the healing of trauma*. Viking.
- Watzlawick, P. (1993). *The situation is hopeless, but not serious: (The pursuit of unhappiness)*. W. W. Norton & Company.
- Zeig, J. K., & International Congress on Ericksonian Approaches to Hypnosis and Psychotherapy. (1994). *Ericksonian methods: The essence of the story*. Brunner/Mazel Publishers.