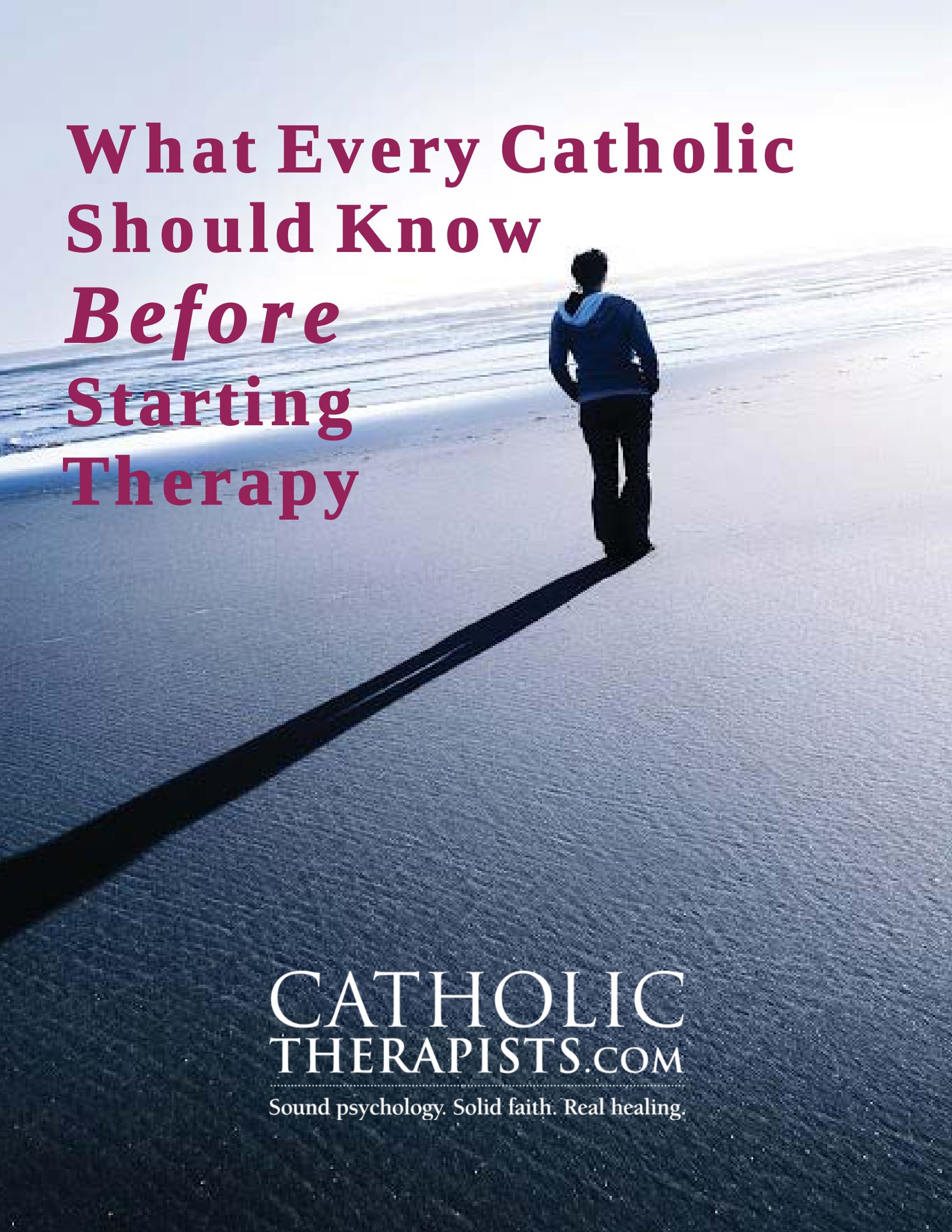
What Every Catholic Should Know *Before* Starting Therapy



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Sound psychology. Solid faith. Real healing.

Therapy can be a very rewarding and healing experience. Many lives and families have been transformed by the process. Yours can be as well.

Among Catholics there are varying attitudes regarding therapy. Some think the faith should be enough and going to therapy indicates a lack of trust in God. While the faith can certainly help us to live happier and healthier lives, Catholics are not immune from the same stresses, hurts, and problems that others face. Sometimes, we need help.

While many Catholics do see the value of therapy and encourage it, still others view it with a jaundiced eye, anxious that secular attitudes and approaches that are prevalent in the field can undermine their faith. They are not entirely wrong. As Catholics, we do need to be sure we find therapists that share our faith and values and will not attempt to influence us in a negative way. This is especially true when treating children. Thankfully there are Catholic therapists out there to answer this need.

Theoretically, therapists are supposed to be *neutral* when it comes to values or religion but that is rarely the case. In order for therapy to be effective, both the therapist and the client need to be authentic. Just like you, every therapist has viewpoints and values that are important to them. Most would agree that murdering an enemy would not be a good thing and they would not give you counsel to help you do that. That would be an example of a *values* influencing their therapy.

As much as that may seem to be a universal belief (I hope!), there are many issues that come up in therapy that affect our moral lives that may not enjoy the same universal acceptance. Things that society may have considered good or bad previously can change in our relativistic society. For instance, in the 1980s it was popular belief in the field that divorce was a better option and that children are better off with two happy parents who are apart rather than living with two unhappy parents that remain together. Much research today shows the contrary. Except in cases where there is serious abuse, children usually fare better in intact families. Hence, the trend is back to preserving the family…but not always. The

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beliefs and values of a therapist in such a situation can have a major impact in a therapeutic outcome.

As Catholic Christians, we hold a worldview that is contrary to much of what society believes. Rather than assuming your therapist is neutral, finding one who states up front what their values are can save you a lot of heartache in the long run.

A therapist has a powerful position as a client reveals inner pain and vulnerability. A client can be easily swayed by the therapist in such a circumstance. This is especially important if you are trying to save your marriage and even more so when bringing your child to a therapist. You are entrusting not only your child's psychological health, but their moral health as well, and you want to make sure any therapist you choose will not undermine your Christian beliefs.

So before you begin therapy, there are some things that you should know that will help you get the most out of it. If you're already in therapy, or have been in the past, this guide may still offer you some important information and guidance that can help you profit from your current therapy and, in some cases, maximize your results from previous therapy.

Let's get started.

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When to Seek Therapy

Anyone living in our current culture can probably attest that life isn't easy! Marital discord, loneliness, work and financial pressure, and parenting challenges can feel overwhelming at times. Some of it is normal and part of the human condition. But for many, these pressures build to a point that they are having trouble coping and holding it all together. Depression and anxiety have become epidemic and can exact a toll on you and your family.

Therapy is something you should consider if you find that you're more sad than happy, that depression has taken your energy and you're having trouble functioning at an optimum level, or if you're plagued with anxiety and worry. Talking it out with someone can be most helpful if you are struggling with relationships with family members, your spouse, friends, or coworkers. Therapy is worth consideration if you're lonely and have trouble forming and keeping relationships.

Very often people wait until they are in crisis before they seek help. Now, if you are in crisis and feel like you're ready to break, by all means, please talk to a therapist right away. Crisis intervention can help to calm the storm and get you grounded. But crisis is not a prerequisite for therapy and should not be the only time to call.

Therapy is aimed at healing and correcting underlying issues that, left untreated, can lead to critical situations. As such it can be most productive when you are *not* in an active crisis. Think of it this way: crises are like active fires that need to be contained and extinguished. But once they are under control, you need to find out what is fueling them so they do not reoccur. If you find your life seems to be a series of crises, broken relationships, and chaos then therapy can be very beneficial to you. It is not a sign of weakness but a sign of strength to know when you need some help.

Have a Good Physical Exam

Before you start therapy, or early into the process it is a good idea to have a thorough physical examination including blood work and urinalysis. Many physical conditions affect our moods so ruling those out, or addressing them properly with

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your doctor and/or nutritionist, is an important first step toward feeling better. (For instance, thyroid disorders are common and are usually easily treatable medically and nutritionally). Share with your therapist whatever physical challenges or conditions you may have so he or she can have a complete picture and will know best how to help you.

Goals

It is important to define some goals for your therapy:

- What would you like to accomplish?
- Are you struggling with depression or anxiety?
- Are you grieving a loss that's been hard to get over?

Having a general idea of what you would like to get out of therapy is helpful to know what you want to work on, as well as to help you measure your success. But don't worry too much if your goals are not immediately clear and all you can think is "I just want to feel better!" That's normal. Your therapist can help you sort it out and set some attainable goals for your work with him or her.

Addictions

If you're struggling with any kind of addiction, or if your spouse is and you're seeking marriage therapy, it is strongly encouraged that you seek help first with getting the addiction under control before attempting actual psychotherapy. Sure, the addiction most likely has emotional or psychological underpinnings so it may seem counterintuitive to not work on them first but if there is an active addiction in play it can actually short circuit your success.

In most cases, addictions arise as ways to cope with emotions, problems, or traumas that a person does not already have the skills and inner strength to deal with directly or that happened at a time when they did not have the emotional strength or maturity to process. In therapy you will be (or should be) discussing and working on those painful feelings and events which will, in all likelihood, make reaching for a drink or drug more compelling as this is the pattern of addiction.

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Hence, we recommend that you first get help with your addiction either through a 12-Step group or rehabilitation program. You should have at least 90 days of continuous sobriety before you start therapy. When you do, it is important to let your therapist know your status with the addiction so they will proceed accordingly.

If it is your spouse that has the addiction, the tendency is to want to bring them into therapy to fix them, but this is usually not productive. Instead you would benefit more from individual therapy. As you learn more about effective strategies for dealing with him or her it can benefit your marriage in the long run. It's also strongly encouraged that you seek help through a free support group like Al-Anon that is specifically designed for spouses and family members of those with addictions.

Once the addiction is under control, dealing with the underlying issues that may have fueled the addiction is essential for maintaining sobriety. Therapy is a great next step. One of the reasons for the high recidivism rate among addicts is that the underlying issues are often not resolved.

Need to be Honest and Open

For therapy to be successful you will need to be honest and open with your therapist. It may take a little time before you're comfortable sharing deep emotions, painful experiences, or past events that you feel ashamed of. That's normal. It is important that you take a little time to get to know your therapist and develop a sense of trust in him or her. You need to take therapy at a pace that is comfortable for you. A good therapist will understand that and will not push you to share before you are at ease. That being said, a good therapist will gently encourage you to share over time in order to help you. Let him or her know how you're feeling and what you're experiencing so they can adjust the process to your needs.

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Therapy Takes Work

In order to benefit from therapy, a client must be actively engaged and willing to do some work in sessions and some homework at home. Most of us have developed habits in our lives. Many of them are good and make life easier - like making the bed in the morning, brushing your teeth, and saying your prayers. But there are other habits and patterns that we are in that may not be helpful and may need to change. Changing habits and patterns takes time and effort. Be prepared to set aside some time for reading that your therapist may suggest and for targeting habits that may need to change.

Differences between Mental and Emotional and Mood Disorders

The term mental illness is often used broadly to include all of the above; however, there is a distinction to be made. Mental illness refers to disorders that affect the thinking of the individual. Psychotic disorders indicate problems in which an individual is not perceiving reality properly such as in schizophrenic disorders in which the individual experiences visual or auditory hallucinations or believes something that is not true, as in a paranoid psychosis. Such disorders are generally organically-based and usually require medication and possible hospitalization.

Emotional and mood disorders affect the way a person feels and are rooted in the emotional life. There can be physiological causes as well, or there may not be. Sometimes medication may be required and many times no medication is needed - only talk therapy. The majority of people who seek individual psychotherapy are suffering from emotional and mood disorders. Emotional and mood disorders can both be rooted in and affected by the way they think so exploring and targeting the thought life is often included in therapeutic treatment.

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Choosing a Therapist

When you're ready to start therapy, you will obviously need to find a therapist to work with. Many therapists will talk to you briefly on the phone before your first appointment. This affords you an opportunity to see if you're comfortable with them. Sometimes though, you'll be meeting them at your first session. Think of this initial session as an interview. They will want to know you and you have the right to get to know them a little as well. Don't be afraid to ask questions and to let them know what you would like to work on in therapy.

Varied Therapeutic Models

There are many schools of thought when it comes to understanding the human psyche. For instance, a behaviorist view believes that human beings, like animals, can be trained to perform or to stop certain behaviors. A psychoanalytic viewpoint believes that a person is motivated by unconscious thoughts and feelings. A cognitive-behavioral orientation believes that our thoughts control our behaviors and therefore therapy is aimed at changing false beliefs to affect changed behaviors. There are many other psychological models - too much to go into in this brief guide.

You should ask your therapist what model they follow and ask them to explain it to you. Many use an eclectic approach using some principals and techniques from more than one model. Understanding the therapist's theoretical orientation will help you to know if this is the right therapist for you. Also feel free to ask them about their experience with the issues with which you are dealing.

The Difference between all the Degrees and Titles

Therapists may have different credentials. Many wonder what the difference is and how to choose. Here's a brief list of the most common credentials.

Psychiatrist (M.D.)

A psychiatrist is a medical doctor. Most psychiatrists will prescribe medications for various emotional, mental, and psychological disorders.

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Some also do therapy but many do not and simply prescribe and manage medications.

Nurse Practitioner (N.P.)

As an alternative to seeing a psychiatrist, some nurse practitioners specialize in helping those who need medications for psychological or mood disorders. Some may also have psychological training and offer counseling.

Psychologist (PhD or PsyD)

A psychologist usually holds either a PhD or a PsyD degree. Most will do therapy but in addition offer psychological testing.

Licensed Mental Health Counselor (LMHC) or Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC)

The name of the licensure varies from state to state. Most licensed mental health counselors and professional counselors have a Master's degree and specialize in psychotherapy.

Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist (LMFT)

Therapists with this title will usually have at least a Master's degree or may have a PhD or PsyD degree with a specialty in working with married couples and families.

Licensed Social Worker (CSW, LCSW, MSW)

Social workers also hold Master's degrees. Many offer counseling and therapy. Some offer community- and hospital-based social services.

Pastoral Counselor (PC)

A pastoral counselor may be a clergy person with psychological training or a layman with both psychological and spiritual training that offers services in a church setting.

These are the most common degrees and titles that you will come across. As far as which one to choose it may not often matter. The exception is if there is a need for medication, in which case, you would need to see a psychiatrist or nurse

practitioner or if there is a need for psychological testing, in which case, you would need to see a licensed psychologist. It is best to talk to a prospective therapist to see who you are most comfortable with personally.

It is important to like your therapist and feel that they like you. If you do not feel you can relate to them or that they are not truly present, interested, and understanding of you and your situation, then you should not feel obligated to continue with them even if they have the most impressive credentials. He or she may be the *expert* but remember your feelings are also important and should not be ignored. Working with someone you like and trust will greatly enhance your therapeutic outcome.

Confidentiality

Whatever you tell your therapist is held in the strictest confidence and cannot be discussed with anyone without your permission. There may be some exceptions which would be spelled out in your informed consent; for example, for consultation and supervision purposes or for billing and insurance matters. If you are in marriage counseling you may see your therapist separately from time to time. In such a case you should discuss with your therapist what information will and what will not be shared with your spouse.

There are two legal exceptions to confidentiality: 1.) If the therapist has reason to believe that you are a threat to your own safety or that of another, they are obligated to take measures to protect you or the person they believe to be in jeopardy; and 2.) All healthcare professionals are *mandated reporters*. If there is information gained, or there is reason to suspect that a child or elderly individual is being abused in any way, the therapist must report that abuse to the appropriate legal authorities.

Insurance: What You Should Know

Not all therapists accept insurance. If you do want or need to go through your health insurance to pay for your therapy, there are some things you need to be aware of. First, your therapist will have to provide a diagnosis and often a treatment plan to

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the insurance company. At times they may be asked to share case notes as well. This may compromise your confidentiality and will also become part of your permanent medical record. This may or may not cause problems for you later on. This is something especially to keep in mind when bringing your child for therapy. Their diagnosis can become a label and follow them for life. In addition, a diagnostic code is required early on - before the therapist may have a complete understanding of you or your child's actual diagnosis. You should discuss with your therapist what will and will not be shared with your particular insurance company and how and when they will render their diagnosis. The same is true when submitting your bills for payment with out-of-network providers. They will also render a diagnosis that will become a part of your medical record.

Telephone and Online Counseling

Although in-person sessions are usually preferable, telephone and online counseling have become very popular these days. These offer convenience as you don't need to spend extra time going to your sessions, especially if the therapist you choose is a distance away from you. If you have small children to care for, telephone and online counseling can be advantageous as you won't need to hire a sitter and be gone for an extended period of time. It also expands your options of therapists to choose from, especially if you are looking specifically for a Catholic therapist as there may not be one located close enough to where you live. Working with the right therapist by phone or internet can be more productive in the long run than working with someone in-person that does not share your values or integrate faith into the therapeutic process.

Naturally, there are advantages and disadvantages and working by phone or internet may not be appropriate in every circumstance, depending on what you are dealing with. For example, if you are extremely depressed or anxious, seeing the therapist in-person enables the therapist to better evaluate your condition as there are often physical and body language cues that are not conveyed by phone (but may be over in the internet). In most cases, though the advantages are minor and phone and internet counseling can be a viable option to consider. It is important to discuss the pros and cons with any therapist you may choose to work with by phone or internet.

Be aware that confidentiality may be compromised if the therapist does not have a secure and HIPAA compliant internet connection. In addition, insurance companies will not usually pay for or reimburse you for anything but in-person sessions and many states require that the therapist be licensed in the state in which the client is located. Discussing all of these points with a prospective therapist will help you to decide if this option is right for you and if the advantages outweigh any disadvantages.

Therapeutic Boundaries

Therapy is most successful when there are clear boundaries between the therapist and the client. Most therapists will have you sign an informed consent where they will spell out the terms of the therapeutic relationship. That consent form should cover things like: how long sessions are, payment and missed session costs as well as telephone and email policies.

You are paying a therapist for their expertise as well as their time to help you. By its very nature, therapy, unlike a friendship, is a one-sided relationship, as it should be. Therefore, the emphasis should always be on you. I have heard too many stories over the years that a therapist talked more about his or her problems than the client's. Although that is hopefully rare, you need to understand what is and what is not appropriate in that regard.

As your therapy relationship unfolds, you may learn a little about your therapist - if they are married or have children as well as some of their own personal hobbies and passions but that is not essential. Often to illustrate a point or offer some wisdom based on experience a therapist may share a similar issue they may have dealt with personally with a client. If it is directed to help the client it can be very effective and healing. However, it is not appropriate for a therapist to be discussing their own current problems during session time. Now of course, if they have just had a death in the family or some other significant illness or event, it is certainly appropriate to inquire how they are doing and express sympathy for them. That simply happens in the course of the relationship you have developed. But for them to share too much can undermine your therapy.

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Consider this: A client of a sensitive and caring nature who knows that his or her therapist is struggling with a problem will often feel reluctant to share their own problems to keep from burdening the therapist. Although those feelings are admirable, it can really work against you. Hence, the professional boundaries are in place for a good reason - to protect you, the client. Therapists are human too and not immune from problems but a healthy and ethical therapist will have their own support structure and not look to their clients for support or advice.

There are other boundaries that will likely be spelled out in the consent agreement your therapist gives you. Seeing your therapist socially or inviting them to social or family events is not encouraged and in most cases would be considered unethical for them to attend. Again, these boundaries are in place to protect you and should not be construed to mean that your therapist does not like you. Most therapists care deeply for their clients and are dedicated to their growth and development. For that reason they maintain professional boundaries, or certainly should.

Keep the Focus on YOU

Let's face it, we do not live alone in this world and are impacted by many people on a daily basis. Difficult marital relationships, kids, tough bosses, and challenging coworkers can sometimes make us miserable. But for therapy to be successful, you need to keep the focus on you as you're the only one you have any power to change. That being said, often when we make changes within ourselves, it affects those around us - and many times positively.

Focusing exclusively on you in therapy is not selfish. Sometimes clients feel only talking about themselves, and the things bothering them, is selfish. It's not. You are paying a therapist for their time and expertise so you and what is important to you are the proper focus.

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Cause versus Blame

Naturally, in the course of therapy you will discuss the other people in your life with whom you have problems. It may be your parents, your spouse, your siblings, your kids, or your friends and coworkers. That is not the same as gossip. You have a right to your feelings and what you share with your therapist is intended to help you resolve challenges and heal from hurts with those people. Your therapist is there to listen and offer guidance and not to judge you or them. A doctor will listen to your symptoms to understand if your stomach pain is from something you ate or another possible condition. What you talk to your therapist about is viewed in a similar vein and not as gossip or detraction. They are looking for a cause and not to blame.

Medications

Many people wonder if they need medication to cope and many are already being prescribed medications by their primary care physicians. The most prescribed drugs in the US today are anti-depressant and anti-anxiety medications. Medications can be useful in treating symptoms such as depression, anxiety, and obsessive compulsive disorders. For those with more persistent conditions such as bipolar disorder or mental illnesses such as schizophrenia, medication is usually an essential protocol. For most though, medications do not actually cure their problems but simply manage the symptoms to restore functioning when those symptoms are severe.

Therapy aims at addressing and healing the underlying problems that have lead to the symptoms. A therapist will evaluate the client and how their symptoms are impacting their daily life and duties and their ability to process their emotions and problems in therapy. They may recommend seeing a psychiatrist for medication. Psychiatrists are medical doctors who prescribe and monitor patients' reactions to medications. Since that is their area of expertise they are usually more familiar with the many medications available than general practitioners. Hence, you may be seeing two professionals: one for talk therapy and the other for the medication. Whenever possible it can be helpful for them to communicate to best help you.

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Not everyone in therapy needs medication. Often it is important to feel your feelings of sadness or anger in order to work on them with your therapist. You should let your therapist know how you are feeling especially if you feel overwhelmed and unable to go about your normal duties so they can help you decide whether or not to try medication.

Medications generally have some side effects. It is important to do your due diligence and read about the medications you are prescribed and to understand possible side effects and interactions with other drugs. Make sure to let your therapist know about ***all*** medications you are taking.

Nutrition

More and more research is being done on nutrition and its role related to mental health. Your diet can greatly affect not only your body but your mind and your moods as well. Talking to a qualified nutritionist can be helpful as the proper diet and supplements can often correct physical imbalances that may be leading to your symptoms. Even simple things like chronic dehydration can fuel depression so do not omit this important step for healing.

In addition, optimizing your gut health with probiotics, supplements, and omega oils can be helpful in remediating emotional symptoms. 90% of the body's serotonin and other feel-good chemicals are produced in the gut, so addressing gut health may be critical to resolving long-standing emotional symptoms.

Other Natural Approaches

Movement and exercise are important components to healthy emotional functioning. Getting 30-minutes of aerobic exercise each day can help greatly in promoting a more positive mood and attitude.

Increasing research demonstrates that essential oils are effective for uplifting mood, calming anxious feelings, promoting restful sleep, and supporting healthy brain function—without side effects. The quickest route to the brain is the olfactory sense, which directly impacts the limbic system (emotional center) of the brain.

Incorporating certified pure, therapeutic grade essential oils, aromatically, topically, and internally, along with proper nutrition, supplementation and exercise can be very helpful in supporting emotional and mental health.

Spiritual Aspects of Therapy

Although therapy is aimed primarily at resolving psychological and emotional issues and not specifically at addressing the spiritual life, - since human beings are physical, emotional, and spiritual beings - spiritual issues, questions and practices often come into play in therapy. Many people seek out therapists who will incorporate spiritual values and prayer into the therapeutic process. This, in my opinion, can be a great aid to healing but you need to exercise some caution here as well.

If you are seeking therapy that has a spiritual component to it, it is certainly appropriate and recommended that you discuss and explore this with whatever therapist you are considering seeing. All spiritual approaches are not equal and there may be some large variations even among those who consider themselves *Christian* therapists.

For Catholics, since the Catholic Church has a well developed doctrine, it is important you find someone who is also committed to Catholic values and understands and respects Church teachings and can bring them into play in the therapeutic setting especially when dealing with certain moral issues. For example, a committed Catholic couple seeking marriage counseling should look for a therapist who is similarly convinced of and committed to the Church's understanding of the indissolubility of marriage.

Other Christian therapists may not have the exact same beliefs; however, a committed Christian therapist may be more likely to offer more than a secular therapist whose beliefs may be at odds with a Christian understanding of the human person.

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Many therapists leave spirituality out of therapy. That doesn't necessarily mean they are hostile to it but that their training and approach does not include that component.

Beware of Spiritual Counterfeits

As secular therapy has increasingly yielded greater frustration in helping people achieve long-term relief and happiness, many therapists are starting to incorporate spirituality into their work. Too many though are incorporating popular forms of spirituality that are New Age in nature. Although these therapists may be well intentioned, this spirituality is at odds with a Judeo-Christian understanding of God and the human person. The New Age sees God as an impersonal life force or energy that permeates the universe and all human beings. They believe that certain techniques can harness this energy for healing.

A Judeo-Christian understanding sees God as a personal, all powerful Being with whom we are in relationship and to whom we owe obedience. Christians believe that the Holy Spirit indwells every human being. As much as that belief may sound similar, it is very different in that we see the Holy Spirit as the third Person of the Holy Trinity and not a force that we can manipulate at will with special techniques, as New Age practitioners attempt to do.

As Christians we believe in God who came in human flesh, in the person of Jesus Christ, who saves us from our sins by His death on the cross. In that light we see suffering very differently than those in the New Age. From a Christian perspective suffering - united to the cross - is redemptive and life giving. From a New Age perspective it is a scandal to be avoided.

This article will help you better understand the difference between Christian and New Age spirituality as well as some of the common New Age modalities to beware of.

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Prayer Helps

Some therapists may incorporate prayer into their sessions and some do not. Whether they do or not, committing the process to prayer pays big dividends. Saying a prayer before your session and taking what you discussed in therapy to prayer on a regular basis invites God actively into the process. Therapists are guides and can be used by God to help you toward healing, but healing ultimately comes from God.

When praying it is important to bring your hurts and pain to the Lord. Pour your heart out. He is listening and wants to hear and answer your prayers. That being said, it is equally important to focus on who God is, on His Majesty, His Power, and His Mercy and not just on your problem. Reading scripture and spiritually-oriented books helps you to see God's power and majesty and how He has been intimately involved with His children throughout history. Forming a relationship with Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior is the goal for every Christian. To that end, making good use of the Sacraments of the Church, especially Reconciliation and Holy Communion is a huge aid to healing and should not be underestimated. Telling your problems and sins to your therapist can help, but only God can forgive and give you the graces to overcome your sins and weaknesses and be truly free.

Therapy is an Investment

Therapy can make a big difference in your life. The healing that you experience and the changes you can make will impact not only you, but your family and future generations as well. Although therapy can seem expensive, when it is understood in that way, it is truly an investment in you, your future, and your children's futures.

May God bless you and grant you abundant healing and joy.

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About Allison Ricciardi

Allison is the Founder and President of www.CatholicTherapists.com, a nationwide network of dedicated Catholic therapists. Founded in 2001, Catholictherapists.com has become the #1 most trusted resource on the web for those seeking help from an authentically Catholic perspective.

Allison is a Licensed Mental Health Counselor in New York and founder and Director of The Raphael Remedy which offers counselling, wellness and life coaching from a Catholic perspective. In addition, Allison is a Certified Essential Oils Coach and doTerra Wellness Advocate. Her core belief is that God has a great plan for each of His children and that by integrating sound psychology, solid faith and God given natural remedies, clients can find real healing and lasting happiness.

Allison is a frequent guest on *The Drew Mariani Show* on Relevant Radio, a regular blog contributor at MindSpirit.com and has appeared numerous times on EWTN, including the *Women of Grace Show* and *Mother Angelica Live*.