

Dr. Jon's Annual Tips for Getting the Most Out of Psychotherapy; Plus, Some General Ideas for Improving Mental Health¹

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- Tell your therapist everything. Pour your heart out. Don't censor yourself. Say the first thought that comes to mind. Allow your speech to stumble. Search for the words. Find them or let yourself keep looking.
- Come to every session. This is a special period in your life when you commit time, energy, and money to a transformational project. Your mind evolves every day, and psychotherapy accelerates and empowers this natural process. But we have maybe only 45 minutes per week to challenge the behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and cultural conditioning of decades. Prioritize your therapy.
- Assume you experience strong, negative emotions – anger, sadness, fear – but actively repress them. These feelings are not absent; you are not the one human who never gets angry; the feelings are present and impacting you but on an unconscious level. The energy required to keep such feelings repressed is enormous and wasteful. Conscious awareness of these feelings will make you feel tender and exposed, but this is the path to emotional intelligence and personal and social strength. In other words, if your therapist asks whether you feel angry, sad, or afraid, consider the idea before immediately saying no.
- Personal change is more about *deciding to* than *knowing how*. For surely in most instances you already know *how* you should act. The more pertinent question is, *Why haven't you decided to?* That's our biggest mystery and solving it requires a careful study of the complexities of you.
- As a standing behavioral recommendation, try every day to find Work and Love. Freud called these the twin pillars of existence. Without progress toward Work and Love, you will always be angry, sad, and afraid.
- I know you don't remember but please try. Discussing your childhood isn't about some homeopathic discharge or cinematic catharsis. We need to talk about your early history so we can see how you are repeating it now. A basic psychoanalytic tenet is that people will automatically, unconsciously repeat elements of their upbringing, for good or ill. Thus, a solid map of your past will help us understand your present.
- Believe in free will. Every time you choose to think or do something, even if it is obsessive and compulsive, you are choosing to think or do it. A psychiatric diagnosis describes both an illness *and* a choice.
- Feelings are a little different. They are not chosen – and that is what makes them so important. Your anger, sadness, and fear are telling you something essential about yourself and your situation. The paradox of emotions is that they are always perfectly logical – every feeling follows directly from some psychic or environmental event and thus provides information about both you and your world. Feel your feelings, describe them to your therapist, and discover the logic of their message.
- Tell your therapist your dreams. They are a message from a part of you that struggles to speak in daylight. Let's hear the important message that came to you in darkness.
- Consider your view of human nature. Do you believe in “the enlightened human” who will be forever free of aggressive thoughts and desires? Or is it possible that aggressive thoughts and desires are natural and normal, part of being animals? If the former, it seems to me that your goal is total self-mastery and you risk a lifetime of harsh internal critique. But if the latter, then instead of silencing the less pleasant aspects you, you must strive to hear them speak. By treating your aggressive side with respect, gravity, and sympathy, you may be less likely to react and behave aggressively.
- At least during our time together, try believing in the unconscious. This is the idea that there is an actor, thinker, feeler inside of you who operates outside of your awareness. Your therapist is uniquely poised, through his or her training, experience, and steady self-analysis, to be aware of your unconscious drives when you are not and so help bring them into your awareness. This may be the most frightening, exciting part of your psychotherapy journey – beginning to become aware that certain aspects of your mind function “dynamically,” meaning, *on their own*.
- Make art, whether or not you think it is any good. You may suffer a great deal because you are not making anything and you are supposed to make something. Do you really care about art? If so, make it. If you are hesitating because of some practical

¹ What follows is based on 13 years of study, training, and practice in psychotherapy – but also on my somewhat idiosyncratic ideas about how psychotherapy works best in general. I do not put these mental health recommendations forward as “universals” but more as suggestions, encouragements, invitations – incitements to become a fuller self.

concerns, e.g. you don't think it will sell or "get you anywhere," then perhaps you don't actually care about art. Making art is an essential practice for humans and belongs on your practical "to do" list regardless of whether the art itself is practical.

- Going to psychotherapy may be the one impractical opportunity in your day, so embrace it. Talk about your toothpaste brand, a seemingly innocuous slip-of-the-tongue, the happy memory of your first bicycle ride. We will always find meaning when we look at your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, whatever they may be. Planning your sessions in advance or anxiously forcing therapy into a practical mode, i.e. *I have to get as much as I can out of therapy today*, may damage the process. By insisting on some impracticality in this nightmarish practical culture, I work as practically as I can to help you.
- Learn to accept praise. If I say you have a diagnosis, you'll accept it. If I tell you I think your mind is great or that you're trying very hard, you may look at me askance. Why is that? Likely the container inside yourself that stores up validation is damaged or missing. Repair begins when you don't immediately reject the idea that you have value.
- Get an annual physical. Exercise. Don't eat shit. Don't smoke. Drink alcohol in moderation.
- And don't smoke weed every day. I used to think marijuana was fairly harmless and the government's stance was puritanical. But I have watched too many thoughtful, talented people waste enormous, irreplaceable amounts of time by self-medicating anxiety and depression with marijuana. Unless used in moderation, I do not think marijuana is good – I think it is a harmful drug.
- If you ride a bicycle in New York City, wear a helmet, get lights, and don't ride drunk or angry.
- *On Entertainment.* Less screen time. Read a novel. Steady exposure to the rich ambiguities of human motivation contained in the great works of world fiction can be profoundly transformative. Also, read psychological literature while we're working together. Freud's *Introductory Lectures* and Lacan's *Seminar* series are meant for students, so they are accessible, as well as incredibly profound. Look for films with strong "psychological journey" themes, like Ingmar Bergman's *Persona* or Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker*. Also, in terms of progressing your own philosophical evolution, I personally recommend Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, and Adorno's *Minima Moralia*.
- *On Meditation and Mindfulness.* Take time to think, ponder, philosophize, psychologize, but not necessarily to meditate.... Mindfulness and meditation have become the contemporary panacea, and there is no standing critique of these practices – so they themselves risk being out of balance. For some people, mindfulness and meditation are mere avoidance or numbing tactics. Don't necessarily let your thoughts float by like clouds – they may be massing as thunderheads in your mind for a reason. Have a confrontation with your thoughts. Answer them back. See what they say.
- *On Nihilism and Existentialism.* The painful sense you may have that life is inherently meaningless and that you will one day die and the whole fraught magnitude of your ambitions and loves will ultimately have no lasting impact on the fate of the universe – this is probably valid. You may be right. *But this is not the end of thought.* Existentialism is not the equivalent of nihilism, nor is existential awareness satisfactory grounds for maintaining a nihilistic depression. Consider this from Sartre: "In any case, let us begin by saying that what we mean by 'existentialism' is a doctrine that makes human life possible...."² Life begins in recognizing but no longer fearing the negative, accepting some aspects of anxiety and depression as central to intelligent life, and making a subjective choice despite its objective meaningfulness. Your life and your choices are meaningful to *you* and that is what matters. The positive feeling state that comes after a nihilistic depression we may call *hope* or *jouissance* – a special kind of tempered joy that attempts to simultaneously accept and challenge the pain of life.
- *On Dialectics.* A one-sided or polarized reaction to life's many challenges will not prove satisfactory over time. For example, you cannot solve ever-present dilemmas, such as self vs. other, pragmatism vs. idealism, pluralism vs. essentialism, etc., by automatically choosing one side. Thoughtfulness requires maintaining a productive tension between simultaneously true yet contradictory values. For example, your needs matter *and* the needs of others matter. How will you decide case-by-case what action is best? This is a lifelong challenge.
- *On Ethics.* Ethics are "objective," at least on a subjective, emotional level. If you are doing something you know is wrong, you will feel sad and anxious.
- *On Love.* And Empathy. Kindness. Sacrifice. The Development of the Capacity for Concern. Protecting Each Other. What did you do today that was gentle? As Henry Miller wrote, "...everybody becomes a healer the moment he forgets about himself."³

² Sartre, 1946, *Existentialism Is a Humanism* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, p. 18.

³ Mark Seems, citing Miller, *Sexus: The Rosy Crucifixion, Book I*, in his "Introduction" to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, 1972/2009, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, New York: Penguin Books, p. xxi.