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The Process of Therapy

By Jeffrey Katz, PH.D.

A couple of weeks ago, I came home late from work. My wife was attending a meeting and the babysitter was there. After giving a report on the kids, the babysitter asked about what kind of work I do. When I told her that I was a psychologist, she seemed very interested, and began to ask what kinds of things I did all day.

As I began to describe a little bit about the types of problems that people come to me with and how I begin to work with them, the babysitter seemed perplexed. She said that she thought that what I did was to give people advice. She figured that people came to me with a problem, and that I would tell them what to do about it.

This is not what happens in therapy - it is not up to me to assume what is "right" for a person, nor can I expect that my client would listen to any advice of mine just because I am the "expert."

For example, if a family comes to me with parent/child problems, my job is to provide some insight into what is going on, and help the family to adjust what they are doing to fit in with their new understanding. Initially, the parents might want to know how to get their children to behave. This sounds like a simple discipline issue. However, it is the learning that takes place through the "process" of therapy that is important- not any one particular discipline technique. Issues that might be uncovered include unresolved issues that the

parents have with their own families of origin, a misunderstanding of children's behavior at different stages of development, unrealistic expectations of the child that the parents may have, unresolved anger that a child has because of the parent's divorce, etc.

In therapy, I am trying to help people see their situation from different points of view. It's not that I want a child who is upset about their parents' divorce to be happy about it, but I do want him to understand why divorce sometimes happens, to accept the reality of the situation and to hopefully develop better ways to deal with it. In the same respect, spouses may be arguing about money - each thinking that the other is nitpicking. If I can help them each to see that they are both concerned about the same thing, but are just coming at it from different points of view, then problem solving can take place without their being so angry with each other.

This brings up my second point. People do not necessarily listen to what I have to say just because I have a Ph.D. after my name. When I think a client is mistaken about something, they are not likely to listen to me if they don't think I really understand their situation. Rather, they might perceive me as just another meddler.

For me to help my clients to see something differently then I have to be able to fully understand their experience and then to



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convey what I see in a way that they can understand through their experience. In other words, I have to talk to clients in the language that they understand, from their own experience.

An example. Sometimes I will see a youngster who is always getting into fights with other kids. The teachers, parents, and I all see that the child is struggling with low self-esteem and over reacts to the normal teasing that they get. This becomes a vicious circle where the child gets teased more because of his over reactions.

I cannot simply tell the child to ignore the other kids. I first have to gain the child's ear by agreeing that "it is awful the way they treat you!" Then I can begin to ask questions to figure out what happens. Based on what the child tells me, I may not try to directly change the child's view that he is being mistreated. Rather, I may help the child to come up with other responses that do a better job of not giving his classmates the pleasure of hurting his feelings.

Once the child is able to change their behavioral response, even if they still believe they are being mistreated, the other kids will naturally begin to treat them better. The natural consequence may be improved friendships. At this stage, with the youngster feeling better (and with me being seen as agreeing with the child and having some good ideas), only then can I begin to help the child explore why they think they were treated that way.

The child usually comes up with what they think others don't like about them (and what they don't like about themselves). Slowly, respecting the child's needs and feelings, I am able to enter the child's world and begin to challenge their view of things more directly.

The process of therapy is developing a relationship with the person where they feel valued, respected, and understood. With the trust that is built up, the therapist can then have an impact that can more deeply reach and help the person.



About the Author

Jeffrey Katz, Ph.D., is a child, adolescent, and adult psychologist and leading expert in the field of ADHD, learning disabilities and behavioral problems. He is also a foremost consultant and sought after speaker for numerous medical, academic, business and legal professionals and organizations. Throughout his career, Dr. Katz has been interviewed by many print, radio and TV outlets and served as a regular columnist for *Tidewater Parent* magazine. He is also co-author of the recently released book *365 +1 Ways to Succeed with ADHD*. A graduate of the California School of Professional Psychology, Dr. Katz has been in private practice in the Hampton Roads, Virginia area for more than 25 years.

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