

Renewing Your Lease on Life



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As a practicing psychotherapist who sees children, adults, and teens—folks between the ages of three and eighty—I am often disturbed by public misconceptions about my line of work. Many people, it seems, think that therapists cure mental illnesses with (and occasionally without) help from the pharmaceutical industry. Some think that you should see a therapist to talk about your feelings. According to much of the popular wisdom, once you have spilled your guts and your feelings, you've "done" therapy.

That's not how I see my job. No way. I see myself as helping people reach their goals. You tell me what you want for your life, and then together we figure out how to get you from point A to point B. I am your consultant, nothing more or less.

There are two things I like about this job description. First, it lets clients (yes, even the kids) know that they are boss. How could it be otherwise? People are necessarily the biggest experts on their own lives. In addition, it sends the message that if you, the client, don't tell me what you want, then I, the therapist, can't do my job. (The agenda is yours.) Last and maybe best, this formulation puts everything in perspective: if we together are going to help you achieve your goals, then we will also need to eliminate any roadblocks along the way. And the roadblocks can be the job from hell, a fear of taking initiatives, or an inability to manage anxiety and depression.

In other words, therapy is all about learning to live well. I want everyone who visits me to feel intrigued by life's possibilities. Look at all there is for you to explore! And this holds true regardless of your age and your circumstances. At some watershed moments—high school or college graduation, marriage, and menopause, for instance—you will become aware that you are creating a new life for yourself, but in fact, because human development is continuous from birth to death, you will be reinventing yourself, bit by bit, on a daily basis. And the process should be fun. After all, in a kind of a way, you need only to focus on showing yourself a good time.

But isn't that selfish? you ask. Yes, it is, and hooray. No matter how generous you may be, and no matter how sensitive to the needs and wants of others, you must always take care of yourself first. Once you are an adult, no one can really parent you except you. And if you don't take care of yourself, then you will not be effective in your relationships with the other people who depend on you.

Remember the flight attendant's instructions before the plane takes off? She says that if the oxygen masks drop down, you need to put on your own before you help your child with his. When you take care of yourself, you protect your child's most important resource.

So when you come to see me we will look at your life through a wide-angle lens. We will consider your situation (or that of your child or family) from a variety of points of view. How are you doing with diet, sleep, exercise, and recreation?

How's your job and your home? How many rings are there in your social circus? People who connect with others in a variety of different rings, or spheres, are better able to withstand adversity in any one area.

We will also look at the obstacles confronting you, and we will consider your options for surmounting them. We will examine ways in which your upbringing, that formidable database of experience, dictates your choices and helps you stay in a comfort zone that may not always serve your interests. We will help you find the red flags that tell you when you have strayed off the course you have set (yes, we all have red flags associated with our personal histories!). And we will look closely at your priorities and your mission and vision for yourself.

So why see a therapist? you ask. After all, you have a spouse, a mother, a few good friends. Why not just use them as sounding boards? A therapist can be preferable for many reasons, but let's take just two.

First, your therapist has no stake in the outcome of your decision-making process. (Your spouse, with an eye on a new Honda Shadow Aero, perhaps, might really like you to take the better-paying job you've been offered even though you doubt that it will answer your professional needs.)

Second, your therapist hears you differently. She can listen intently while you describe your concerns and situation, and afterward she will be able *to tell you what she hears you saying*--to distill the essence of what you want or need and to pinpoint the areas of passion or challenge. She will check back with you to confirm that she got it right.

If you and I as your therapist put our heads together, in other words, we should be able to forge a collaborative relationship that will set your feet on the path, pointing you in the direction you have chosen while making you more alert to the

process of getting there. And then, from one hour to the next, from day to day or week to week, you should find yourself more fully enjoying the experience of being alive.

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