

8 Life-Changing Lessons I Learned From Seeing A Therapist In My 20s

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1. You are stronger than you think.

Give yourself credit for what you have gotten through. You have coping skills you probably didn't know you have, or that you fail to recognize on a regular basis. Or as my psychologist said: "It is like talking to a Vietnam Vet who doesn't know what to do about a stuck elevator." In other words, you really do have survival skills. And if you seek therapy (or even if not, and you are just interested in self-awareness and personal growth), you are empowering yourself.

You are strong for being you, and owning the things that you want and need to change in your life. Most people don't sign up to face their issues head on. If you are recognizing the presence of issues in your life, that itself is a sign of strength.

2. The most difficult step of character development is to enjoy being alone.

Truly being alone means getting comfortable by yourself and not filling your aloneness with unhealthy relationships or behaviors. This is one of the hardest things to do, but it is also profoundly simple, and essential for sustainable happiness.

3. Sometimes you have to let go of your notion of a happy family.

As a 20-something in therapy, I was overly worried about one of my parents dying. When I asked my psychologist why, he said, "With them dying, your dream of reconciliation dies too." My fear of their death wasn't necessarily about death itself, but about deeper pain I felt in my relationship with my parents. I was waiting for apologies from them, and to become some version of the happily-ever-after family.

By projecting my feelings onto this relatively concrete fear of death, I was trying to cope. But my psychologist helped me make the connection, and told me I should allow the dream of the happy family to die instead. Sometimes parents aren't capable of love, and that isn't your fault. "This is their problem," he said. "They are unable to give you the love and support you deserve. They don't know how."

4. You need to accept you.

When you act like you need the approval of your parents, other people, or even the entire universe, what you really need is your own approval. Accept your own mistakes and actions and let them go. We are all flawed humans. No one gets a blank slate or gets through life regret-free. Self-acceptance is liberating.

5. Don't take the blame for your parents' behavior.

I thought my parents' behavior toward me was a sign of me being a defective child. That is, if only I could be a dream child, my parents would be different and treat me with the love I needed. It took me a long time to learn *not* to take responsibility for my parents' behavior. My psychologist encouraged me to only play my side of the tennis match. I could serve the ball -- e.g. learn to be authentic and interact with my parents as an adult, rather than as a child trying to please them. Then I would need to learn to accept whatever it was that my parents did in response; nothing on their side of the net has anything to do with me.

In any relationship, really, we only should play our side, never try to manipulate the outcome on the other side. Setting and recognizing healthy boundaries takes practice, but the better you get at boundaries, the better your life will be.

6. Watch out for repetition-compulsion.

One of my behaviors that fueled my depression was getting into relationships with men that replicated the drama of my childhood. I was with a guy who was controlling. He engulfed me with his needs, wanted me to change to please him, and I walked on egg shells so he wouldn't get angry. Just like home. Sometimes we get stuck trying to replicate our childhood in adulthood. Healthy relationships are positive and energizing. If a relationship drains you and makes you exhausted, exit stage left.

7. Practice being real.

I got a lot of practice being fake as a kid. I had a childlike belief that I could help keep the peace at home if I tried hard enough. I was more likely to tiptoe to try and please everyone than I was to be authentic and honest. In one of our sessions, however, my psychologist asked me, "Do you think I would have been able to help you over the years if I always made sure I didn't piss you off?" The answer is no.

Sometimes being real won't make other people happy. But we are only responsible for how we play our side. And that is what empowers us to make change.

8. Fully accepting what your parents can't give you frees you.

When you grow up with abuse, it can be a long journey to forgiveness and acceptance. In my case, I decided to have the best relationship I could with my parents while fully recognizing their limitations. Letting go of any fantasies of fixing my family freed me. No longer did I seek things from them that they aren't capable of giving me, and I took back any power they had to hurt me.

Soon I realized my life was now my own. The same goes for you: your life is yours and no one else's.

<http://www.mindbodygreen.com/0-18184/8-life-changing-lessons-i-learned-from-seeing-a-therapist-in-my-20s.html>