

Preparing for Your First Psychotherapy Session

A Client Guide *Helping you get the most from therapy Inspired by the work of Dr. Mark Widdowson and general best practices in psychotherapy*

Why Prepare?

Starting therapy is a courageous step. The first session is often an **assessment and getting-to-know-you** meeting. Being prepared helps reduce anxiety, builds a strong therapeutic alliance, and sets you up for better results. Research and clinical experience (including Widdowson's work) show that clients who understand the process and actively participate tend to benefit more.

What to Expect in the First Session

- **Introductions and rapport-building:** Your therapist will explain their approach and answer questions.
- **Confidentiality discussion:** Everything you share is private, with legal/ethical limits (e.g., risk of harm).
- **History and current concerns:** You'll discuss what brings you to therapy.
- **Goal setting:** Early conversations about what you want to achieve.

Therapy is collaborative — you set the agenda with your therapist's guidance.

How to Prepare Before Your First Session

1. **Reflect on your goals** Ask yourself:
 - What specific problems or symptoms brought me here?
 - What would I like to be different in my life (e.g., reduced anxiety, better relationships, improved mood)?
 - What changes am I hoping for in the short and long term?
2. **Write it down** Bring notes about:
 - Recent events or ongoing issues
 - Previous therapy experiences (what worked/didn't)
 - Questions for the therapist (e.g., "How do you work with [issue]?" or "What can I expect from sessions?")
3. **Practical logistics**
 - Confirm time, location/platform, and any paperwork.
 - For virtual sessions: Test your tech and choose a private, quiet space.

- Arrive in enough time to start your session at the agreed time.
 - Consider journaling your thoughts/feelings in the days leading up.
4. **Mindset tips** (drawing from Widdowson's guidance on "Getting the Most Out of Therapy")
- Be open and honest — therapists are trained not to judge.
 - Therapy involves a unique relationship; it's normal to feel vulnerable at first.
 - You are the expert on your life; the therapist provides tools and perspective.
 - Speak up if something doesn't feel right — good therapists welcome feedback.

Common Questions Clients Have

- **How long will it take?** It varies; some benefit from short-term work, others longer.
- **Will it be uncomfortable?** Sometimes yes — growth often involves facing difficult feelings, but at your pace.
- **What if the therapist isn't the right fit?** It's okay to discuss this or seek someone else.

Tips for Ongoing Success

- Attend regularly and do any between-session tasks.
- Be patient with yourself and the process.
- Track your progress and celebrate small wins.

Remember: Seeking help is a strength. The therapeutic relationship is one of the most powerful factors in positive change.

References & Further Reading

- Widdowson, M. (2016). *Transactional Analysis for Depression: A Step-by-Step Treatment Manual* (Appendix on "Getting the Most Out of Therapy").
- General resources from Psychology Today, Grow Therapy, and similar evidence-based guides.