

# PURSUING THERAPEUTIC RESOURCES TO IMPROVE YOUR HEALTH

Linda L. Bieniek, CEAP, La Grange, Illinois, and Karen Kennedy, MSW, RSW, Toronto, Canada

Leaders in the post-polio community point to critical factors that can empower polio survivors to manage the effects of their polio and optimize their health. They recommend obtaining reliable information; cultivating strong support systems, including partnerships with health professionals; and developing positive attitudes, new skills, and an ability to enjoy the present (Maynard, Headley, 2002).

Even when following these recommendations, people sometimes continue making choices that are harmful to their health and relationships (Thoren-Jonsson, & Grimby, 2001). Why? Research has revealed that unresolved polio memories can interfere with the ability to make changes – physical, emotional, cognitive, and even spiritual – that contribute to health and well-being (Westbrook, 1996). Survivors have reported improvements in their health and relationships following successful experiences in therapy.

This is the last in a series of articles in *Polio Network News* exploring this phenomenon and the value of psychotherapy as an option for resolving the impact of polio memories. This article is designed to assist in the following ways:

**For individuals interested in pursuing psychotherapy**, this article recommends four steps for identifying and selecting qualified professionals.

**For individuals currently working with a therapist**, these same guidelines can help in assessing the effectiveness of their own therapy.

**For survivors with limited financial resources**, a separate section (page 9) contains suggestions about other resources to pursue, including publicly and privately funded services.

Bieniek has created a 3-page “**Treatment Approach Options**” chart that describes various styles of treatment, the benefits and methods of each, characteristics of people who may find a particular approach appealing, and available resources. The chart offers useful suggestions on ways to reduce the stress of physical symptoms and present-day problems. It is available on [www.post-polio/ipn](http://www.post-polio/ipn) or upon request from those who send a self-addressed, stamped (37¢ USA), business-sized envelope to International Polio Network (IPN).

## UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF A PSYCHOTHERAPIST

Individuals who choose to explore psychotherapy as a treatment option need to understand the role of the psychotherapist and the importance of the psychotherapist’s training, knowledge,

experience, and personality in contributing to productive results.

Individuals previously in therapy may have had a disappointing or unproductive experience. As in any profession, the skill level and integrity of therapists varies. Also, a client’s own readiness and willingness to deal with

uncomfortable issues can affect the results of the process.

However, when a therapist’s expertise and personality match a client’s needs, the therapy process and relationship can produce extremely beneficial insights and behavior changes for the client (Roberts, 1998).

Therapy is a blend of art and science. The therapist’s job is to help the client make healthy changes to achieve his/her goals. A therapist is a guide and mentor, responsible for interacting with a client in ways that provide a healthy, safe, professional relationship. For people who have had traumatic experiences, this is especially critical. The understanding insights of the therapist’s responses can help transform the client’s limiting beliefs about self, others, and the world that may have been formed in response to traumatic events in the past (Napier, 1993).

A therapist’s role also includes matching the client’s needs and ways of learning with appropriate responses, interventions, and available resources. For clients who have had hurtful and harmful life experiences, research offers a number of effective approaches that therapists can use.

Clients are not responsible for trying to make their therapists feel good. Reading about professional boundaries is especially advisable for those who have a tendency to feel responsible for another person’s feelings (*Polio Network News*, Summer 2001, Vol. 17, No. 3, p. 5).

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## RECOGNIZING A QUALIFIED THERAPIST

*Look for a therapist who possesses appropriate knowledge, skill, and experience.*

Therapists demonstrate their knowledge and skills when they:

- ◆ Use strategies that help clients make positive changes.
- ◆ Present insights and options for responding to current life situations.
- ◆ Explain the reasons for using certain approaches and offering specific advice.
- ◆ Ensure that clients do not spend their therapy sessions simply reporting current events in their lives – often a way people avoid dealing with uncomfortable issues. Instead, the therapist can ask questions to help the client gradually confront issues.
- ◆ Identify unhealthy, self-protective coping skills in non-judgmental ways, uncover the positive underlying needs, and offer healthy options for meeting those needs.
- ◆ Teach clients how to recognize characteristics of trustworthy people and how to develop relationships with them.

For example, when a client slips into an unhealthy coping pattern (e.g., overeating, overworking, etc.), the therapist's job is to teach the client how to respond compassionately rather than critically (Amada, 1995). A therapist can remind the client to reward him/herself for the smallest changes in thinking, communicating, or responding to a situation. Practicing ways to ask for support with the therapist also can help a client gain

confidence needed to support and share his/her progress with others.

When therapy involves resolving traumatic memories, it is critical that the therapist possesses the specialized training and experience to do memory work safely and effectively. This means that the therapist must understand the effects of traumas – including how psychological or emotional issues have impacted their client's life – and how to use research-based interventions that can improve clients' responses to present-day situations that unconsciously remind them of the past (van der Kolk, 1996). Therapists who intervene inappropriately, or fail to intervene when needed, may actually cause further distress.

### *Look for a therapist who thoroughly assesses the client's needs.*

The therapist and client need to agree on specific changes the client wants to make and to review the treatment progress on an ongoing basis. A therapist displays respect for the client's intelligence and intuition by seeking feedback, inviting the client to participate in the creation of treatment plans, and by integrating the client's needs in the next step of the process (Williams, 1994).

It is important for clients to know that therapists often approach the assessment process in different ways. Some may spend the first few sessions asking questions and having the client tell his/her history. Others will address an immediate need and gradually obtain information throughout the sessions.

Each approach has advantages and disadvantages. What is important is that the therapist asks questions in a respectful and paced way to help the client voice what is troubling and explore the possible causes of these difficulties. The therapist needs this information to determine how to intervene and help the client. Steps of this process include:

- ◆ Asking questions to understand the client: *What do you think ... How do you feel about ... What do you wish had happened ... What do you consider your options?*
- ◆ Gathering adequate information before drawing conclusions or making recommendations.
- ◆ Asking questions to discover unhealthy coping patterns.
- ◆ Identifying problems and diagnosis/conditions accurately.

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*Linda: As an Employee Assistance Professional, I have assessed clients who have been in therapy for years and yet their therapists had not identified their unhealthy coping patterns. Employees reported routinely overspending, exploring cybersex, or having a few drinks each night when I asked them what they do when they feel anxious, overwhelmed, or lonely. One employee remarked, "No one has ever asked me those questions."*

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For therapy to be effective, a polio survivor typically needs to work with a therapist who understands and can *integrate the impact of a client's disability on his/her life*. This means learning how polio has affected the client's past and also how physical adjustments and emotional losses in the present



impact the person's relationships and life. Understanding the causes of the client's new weakness, fatigue, and physical pain, and the need for pain management and energy conservation, is important for determining treatment strategies and the client's tolerance levels.

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**Karen:** *As a social worker counseling individuals who have had polio, I often indicate to clients that they are welcome to stand, walk, or take a short break if that will help them manage their pain and physically pace the session. Upon hearing this, one individual stated, "Thank you for acknowledging that my pain is a daily reality."*

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Experts stress that a thorough assessment includes an understanding of a person's family system and the family's attitudes toward the person's disability: differing roles, relationships in terms of power issues, and communication dynamics (Olkin, 1999).

Questions about a client's family history should address the possibility of chemical dependency and other addictions. The prevalence of addictions is higher in families with a child who has a physical disability. This is important because individuals who grew up with chemically dependent parents or elders are more likely to have experienced physical or emotional neglect or abuse, to have witnessed domestic violence, and to be at increased risk of sexual abuse (Olkin, 1999).

Since studies have repeatedly found the rates of substance use (e.g., alcohol, prescription drugs, or illegal drugs) in persons with

disabilities substantially higher than in the general population, it is important that a therapist screen for this possibility. Olkin explains that the higher rates stem from chronic pain, social isolation, and increased incidence of sexual abuse (Olkin, 1999).

Without this screening, a person may be in therapy struggling with depression and/or anxiety, not knowing that one of the obstacles to progress may be dependency on using alcohol or drugs. If a therapist does not ask questions at a deeper level or if the client withholds the truth, the therapist will be missing vital information that is needed to accurately assess and address the client's treatment needs.

#### ***Look for a therapist who creates a safe environment.***

Creating safety is one of the primary responsibilities of a therapist who helps clients resolve traumatic memories (van der Kolk, 1996). Van der Kolk warns that the failure to approach trauma-related material gradually, with safety measures in place, may intensify trauma symptoms, such as sleep disturbances, digestive problems, and anxiety attacks. For this reason, therapists need to teach clients skills that will enable them to stay present to reality while managing their reactions to their memories. Preparing clients, before exploring memories, will help prevent them from relapsing into unhealthy coping patterns when they begin to deal with their stories (Napier, 1993).

An important part of healing from polio memories takes place when a client tells his/her stories and the therapist responds with empathy and understanding.

A therapist conveys compassion through tone of voice, facial expressions, body posture, and comments. These characteristics, combined with strong listening skills, helps to create a safe setting that encourages the client to tell his/her truths.

When a client experiences emotion such as fear, shame, guilt, anger, or sadness, feeling safe, understood, and accepted is need-

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**International Polio Network (IPN)**  
4207 Lindell Boulevard, #110  
Saint Louis, MO (Missouri) 63108 USA  
314-534-0475 ■ 314-534-5070 fax  
gini\_intl@msn.com

**www.post-polio.org**

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ed in order to openly express and discuss these feelings. The therapist is responsible for encouraging healthy expressions of feelings and for suggesting safe ways to release them (e.g., art therapy, letter writing). By contrast, if the therapist changes the subject when a client begins to cry, the client may interpret the therapist's response as disapproval or discomfort, and may shut down his/her emotions – replaying an unhealthy and even traumatizing coping pattern.

***Look for a therapist who tailors the process to the client's needs.***

Therapists should explain available treatment options, including their intended purpose, benefits, and limitations. This information will empower the client to collaborate with the therapist in tailoring the process to his/her specific needs.

Experts say that therapists need additional skills to understand and work through the complexi-

ty of issues related to a client's disability and need to know how to modify the diagnosis and treatment depending on the disability (Olkin, 1999). Clients need to pay attention to how a therapist responds to their disability. If a therapist focuses solely on the client's disability or ignores it, this can be detrimental to the therapy process.

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*Karen: When I meet with individuals who have respiratory problems, I sometimes initiate relocating the session to a spacious office with a window in order to accommodate the client's need for "breathing space."*

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***Look for a therapist who develops a trusting partnership.***

From the very first interaction and throughout the therapy process, a therapist builds trust by communicating empathy, compassion, and integrity. Examples include:

- ◆ Sitting across from the client (not behind a desk).
- ◆ Making direct eye contact.
- ◆ Acknowledging the client's comments and feelings.
- ◆ Pausing during sessions to allow time for reflection.
- ◆ Being warm and approachable.
- ◆ Communicating honestly, clearly, and consistently.
- ◆ Being punctual for appointments, except in emergencies.
- ◆ Acknowledging reasons for becoming defensive or critical and apologizing for these reactions if they occur (Roberts, 1998).
- ◆ Remembering key information.
- ◆ Holding the client responsible without shaming the person.
- ◆ Explaining the need to refer to another professional or to seek consultation about complex issues.

***Look for a therapist who empowers the client.***

Therapists can empower clients by affirming their strengths. For example, many survivors have deep reservoirs of spiritual strength that their therapists can highlight and nurture. Therapists can encourage clients to apply their own strengths to the therapeutic process.

Other ways that therapists can empower their clients include:

- ◆ Affirming the important issues that the client raises, identifying issues as they emerge, and integrating them into the sessions.
- ◆ Supporting the exploration and use of other resources.
- ◆ Encouraging the client to consider the therapy relationship as a "practice ground" for managing other relationships,

**LINDA L. BIENIEK, CEAP**, is a Certified Employee Assistance Professional who has assessed, counseled, and referred clients to therapists. As a former manager of an internal Employee Assistance Program, she has interviewed and screened a significant number of therapists to ensure that her referrals match client needs. She has over 15 years of professional training in trauma issues, including participation in Masters and Johnson Trauma Programs.

**KAREN KENNEDY, MSW, RSW**, is a registered medical social worker who, for the past ten years, has worked in the Post-Polio Clinic at West Park Healthcare Centre in Toronto, Ontario. West Park Healthcare Centre is a regional rehabilitation centre and offers rehabilitation, complex continuing care and long-term care services.

As a member of the Post-Polio Clinic team, Kennedy provides assessment, counseling, education, management recommendations, and referral for individuals and families of those who have previously contracted poliomyelitis. Kennedy holds a Masters of Social Work degree from the University of Toronto.

*The authors welcome your comments. Send them to IPN (4207 Lindell Boulevard, #110, Saint Louis, MO 63108-2915 USA, gini\_intl@msn.com).*



inviting the client's honest reactions to the therapy and the therapist, and learning to resolve differences in healthy ways.

- ◆ Providing feedback that increases a client's self-awareness and ability to listen to self and others.

Therapists can *promote self-care* by helping clients develop the skills to:

- ◆ Assert their needs.
- ◆ Practice positive self-talk.
- ◆ Set limits and say "no" when necessary.
- ◆ Make time and space for pleasure.
- ◆ Use relaxation strategies and/or affirming materials.

People with disabilities need to pay attention to how a therapist talks about their physical and medical conditions. It is important for a therapist to use *empowering language that shows respect for the whole person* and recognizes that one's physical condition is not the sole basis for one's identity. Disability organizations have identified empowering, respectful words, and also those considered demeaning.

Individuals need to understand that statements that glorify them as heroic or refer to them with pity are potentially harmful. The polio survivor who needs to accept physical limitations yet is glorified for excessive performance, may strive to overachieve in order to gain recognition from the therapist. On the other hand, an attitude of pity can easily contribute to promoting a victimized rather than resilient self-image.

In addition, when a client talks about his/her disability in negative terms, the therapist has the opportunity, and responsibility, to make the client aware of the potential effect of using such references and to offer alternative words that promote a positive self-image.

### ***Look for a therapist who demonstrates integrity and ethical boundaries.***

An ethical therapist will:

- ◆ Display healthy boundaries. Therapists should *not* barter services, have a personal or dual relationship with the client, or have any sexual contact with a client (Napier, 1993).
- ◆ Maintain confidentiality and obtain informed consent except as required by law.
- ◆ Hold sessions in a private setting.
- ◆ Follow through with policies such as canceling appointments.
- ◆ Communicate consistently and clearly about policies.
- ◆ Seek supervision and consultation about therapeutic issues as needed.
- ◆ Encourage the client to seek medical assessment and treatment as needed.

### **IDENTIFYING QUALIFIED THERAPISTS**

Qualified professionals may include psychologists, psychiatrists, clinical social workers, psychiatric nurses, clinical mental health counselors, and marriage and family therapists. However, their level of training, roles, experience, and fees vary widely (Sherman, 2001).

For this reason, individuals seeking psychotherapists are encour-

aged to approach the selection process as *consumers searching for a professional* who is accessible, affordable, and well-suited to help them achieve their goals. Survivors can identify potentially qualified professionals by obtaining recommendations from trustworthy sources. They can ask, "What therapist would you go to or refer a family member to if they had similar issues?" when they contact the following resources for referrals (Finney, 1995):

#### **Personal contacts/resources**

- ◆ Well-informed colleagues or friends
- ◆ Physician or clergy member
- ◆ Employee assistance programs
- ◆ Reputable mental health professionals

#### **Professional organizations**

- ◆ Trauma experts who train therapists (e.g., International Society for Stress Studies, authors, trauma programs)
- ◆ Professional licensing or certifying associations (e.g., National Association of Social Workers, American Psychological Association)

#### **Health/medical, social services resources**

- ◆ Pain or rehabilitation clinics
- ◆ Psychology, psychiatry, or social work departments in medical centers or universities
- ◆ Mental health associations
- ◆ Local family or disability services

When calling for referrals, it is important to keep organized notes that identify the person who offers the referral and their feedback.

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## CHOOSING A THERAPIST

Since most referral services do not rate the competency of their members, it is important to research and interview several potential therapists. If an introductory session cannot take place in person, interviews can take place on the phone. Potential clients can learn a lot from the way a therapist responds to questions. "Each interview will provide valuable information and give you more experience about therapists so you will become more confident about your ability to make a wise choice. Do not hire a therapist you do not like (Finney, 1995)."

In selecting a therapist, individuals are encouraged to analyze their options and trust their intuition. Consumers may gain insight about each therapist they interview from:

- ◆ How they feel while interviewing the therapist, e.g., comfort level (Sherman, 2001).
- ◆ How the therapist communicates.
- ◆ What they understand about the person's experience, training, treatment approaches, and attitudes.
- ◆ What, if anything, they learn about themselves from talking with that therapist.

The questions below can be used as guidelines for interviewing therapists (Bruckner-Gordon, et al, 1988). However, what is most important is for a person to ask questions that will help in making a satisfying decision (Striano, 1987).

### Background

What do you specialize in?

What is your experience work-

ing with traumatic memories? What is your experience working with persons with disabilities or chronic health conditions? What is your educational background? What kind of license or certification do you have?

### Policies and practices

Do you set treatment goals? How do you determine if a client is making progress? What are your fees? Are you covered by my insurance? Do you offer a sliding scale? What are your policies regarding emergency phone consultations and cancellations of appointments (Finney, 1995)?

## IN CONCLUSION

Each survivor needs to decide whether exploring past memories fits with his/her priorities, life choices, and capabilities. Some people cannot afford to work in depth, and others may choose not to. Still, others may opt to explore psychotherapy or the alternative approaches outlined on page 9. Whatever a person's choice, individuals who are interested in resolving the impact of their polio memories are encouraged to:

- ◆ Clarify their priorities and the benefits they want to gain from this "learning experience."
- ◆ Approach themselves compassionately and patiently.
- ◆ Research and analyze their options.
- ◆ Focus and build on their strengths while being realistic and accepting of their physical needs.
- ◆ Identify trustworthy people they can turn to for encouragement.
- ◆ Ask questions to gain the information they need and

trust their intuition about the responses they receive.

- ◆ Select an ethical, qualified clinician with whom they feel safe.

Whatever avenues individuals choose, this information provides useful guidelines for obtaining support as they consider ways to understand and manage the impact of polio memories on their present-day lives. ■

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