



Humanistic psychological therapies

What skills can service users expect their therapists to have?

Anthony D. Roth¹, Andrew Hill² and Stephen Pilling³

**¹Research Department of Clinical,
Educational and Health Psychology, UCL**

**²School of Community, Health Sciences and Social Care,
University of Salford**

What are humanistic psychological therapies?

Humanistic therapies are psychological treatments that can help people with emotional difficulties and problems in relating to people.

Humanistic therapists assume that people have a natural tendency to develop to their full potential – it's as though people have an inner sense of what's best for them and can usually find their own way forward. When someone develops psychological difficulties humanistic therapists assume that (in some way) they have lost touch with this natural tendency, and that they may need help to get back on track. Humanistic therapists believe that two things make this process of recovery more likely:

- a) the development of a trusting relationship between the therapist and client – because without this it is very difficult for clients to get in touch with how they think and feel. The therapist aims to make sure that the client feels welcomed and understood – clients should feel that their therapist is listening carefully to their concerns and that their therapist is not judging them in any way.
- b) rather than focussing on symptoms the humanistic therapist sees the client as a whole person and tries to understand their “world” from their point of view.

Humanistic therapists place a special emphasis on building up a trusting and understanding therapeutic relationship. This is because they believe that this is the starting point for helping clients, and that without this trusting relationship change is unlikely to happen.

What does therapy involve?

Everyone's therapy will be a bit different, but we have tried to describe some of the important things that a good therapist will do and what they will help you focus on.

Starting off

All therapists aim to help you feel respected and to create a setting in which you feel comfortable to talk. Many people find it difficult to speak about their problems with someone they do not know, and it is important that your therapist can make you feel that they are to be trusted, and can help you manage if you talk about things which upset you or about which you feel embarrassed.

Talking openly about yourself for the first time to a new person can feel difficult and you may be worried about what your therapist thinks about you. Your therapist will help you to make sense of any worries you may have about starting therapy. They should give you the feeling that they know that starting therapy can be difficult and that they can understand what life is like for you.

Getting a picture of what you need

Your therapist will usually try to get a good a picture of what you are finding difficult in your life and how this is affecting you and people close to you. They may ask some questions, but they should also make it clear that you only need to give as much information as you feel comfortable with. Many people find that as therapy gets going they are able to talk more openly, and you shouldn't find yourself under pressure to say more than you want.

Although your therapist will need to gather some basic information about you and your life, most of the time they will let you take the lead. This is because they are interested finding out how you see and feel about things, rather than asking you lots of questions.

Explaining how humanistic psychological therapy might work for you

Early on your therapist should explain how their approach to humanistic therapy works, and help you to think about how it might help you. For example, getting in touch with how you feel about yourself or about other people could help you consider ways of dealing with things differently. It could also make it easier to accept things which are difficult but ultimately can't be changed. The early stages of therapy are about learning to trust your therapist and letting them get to know more about you. At first you may not be 100% convinced that humanistic therapy is for you. This is not unusual and you may need to experience one or two sessions to fully make your mind up.

Sharing ideas about what you want to achieve

Some people start therapy with clear ideas about what they want to work on; other people may be less clear (for example, they may feel troubled, but not sure why). Working with your therapist will help to develop your ideas about the areas to start focusing on. Of course, these ideas may change over time, so your therapist will be flexible and focus on any new issues which arise. The main point is for you to be working with your therapist on matters which are important to you.

What can you expect of your therapist

Your therapist is responsible for ensuring that your sessions take place at a regular time, in a setting where you can be sure of confidentiality. Wherever possible they should let you know if they expect to be away or need to change the time of your therapy.

Length and frequency of treatment

Your therapist will talk with you about the number of sessions you can expect to have.

In practice the number of sessions you are offered can vary quite a lot, depending on where you are being seen. In most NHS settings it is likely that you will be seen once a week for about 50-60 minutes, for a fixed number of sessions. There are some settings where therapy is 'open-ended' – in other words therapy can go on until the therapist and client agree that it should stop.

Ending the therapy

Your therapist should make sure that you are clear about the number of sessions available and when the therapy will end. They will want to know how you feel about ending the

therapy and give you time to talk about this. For example, some people find that ending therapy brings up feelings of sadness because it reminds them of previous endings in their lives. Your therapist will also help you to look to the future and think about the changes you have made. This could include thinking about how you will deal with any further problems and challenges.

Some differences between humanistic therapies

Although all humanistic therapies pay a lot of attention to building a good relationship with the client, they do differ in some important ways:

Some therapists always let the client take the lead – the therapist will follow what the client wishes to talk about. Others might be more ‘active’ – they may draw the client’s attention to feelings lying under the surface which the client may not be fully aware of, or that they find difficult to put into words (for example, a client who says that they are not worried by something, but actually looks very anxious, or who says they are feeling fine but who look very sad).

Some therapists will actively encourage clients to begin focusing on feelings that are getting them stuck. An example of this might be a client who feels like they are in “two minds” or “at odds” with themselves – imagine someone who is very unhappy at work because they feel bullied by their manager. Although they might want to show their boss how angry they are, they might also be very worried about the consequences of doing so, and so tell themselves that they either have to resign or put up with things as they are. The therapist might ask them to have an imaginary ‘conversation’ between these two positions. The aim is to get a better understanding of each point of view, and in this way decide the way forward that best suits the client.

Some therapists make use of the “relationship” that develops between themselves and the client, because this can be a useful way of casting light on the way that the client thinks and feels in relationships outside the therapy room. An example would be a client who worries about getting too close to people in case they are rejected by them; this could lead them to keep their distance from the therapist as well. If this happened the therapist might draw attention to this. Encouraging the client to talk about their worries about opening-up with the therapist would help the therapy go better, and also help the client to think about the ways in which they find it hard to open up to people in their everyday lives.

If you want to find out more about the approach your therapist usually takes, you should feel free to ask them.

Finding out more

Some websites with helpful information about humanistic approaches include:

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)
www.bacp.co.uk/

United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP)
www.psychotherapy.org.uk/

British Association for the Person-Centred Approach (BAPCA)
www.bapca.org.uk/