

DAY ONE

How Self-Analysis Works

Visualize yourself in a therapist's office, on your first day in therapy. Does your therapist look like Sigmund Freud? A TV character like Dr. Melfi or Frasier? Or a famous media personality like Dr. Drew, Dr. Phil, Dr. Laura, Dr. Ruth, Dr. Keith Ablow, or Dr. Sanjay Gupta? You might be excited, nervous, or skeptical. It may feel vaguely like an interview for a new job. Will the therapist like you? Where do you sit? How do you start? What are the rules? Forty-five minutes may seem infinitely long or be the shortest time you've ever experienced. Maybe you are feeling slightly guilty that this time is going to be devoted just to you—only you. You can ramble, babble, hum, or just sit and smile in silence at the person in front of you.

Nowhere else but in therapy does someone listen to you so intently. Your therapist remembers names, places, and events and offers you connections among them. A therapist hangs on to your every word. This method is at the heart of therapy: it is firmly based on the idea that words can reveal what is deep inside your unconscious. The answer to whatever you are struggling with is in the information your words impart.

What poses the challenge for a therapist is that a patient offers bits and pieces of a life that are not in a logical order, that have to be conflated and merged into a unified saga. Characters or details might be omitted; events seem to jump back and forth, from one year to the next. Sometimes what is *not* said can be a very important piece of the puzzle. A therapist will note your choice of words, the inflections, the repetitions. Depending on the approach the therapist is taking, he or she may mirror, interpret, or refute what you say. With this back-and-forth method, you'll arrive at a moment of truth.

The crucial step is right at the beginning. Just the fact that you decided to start the quest means that you will be able to find an answer, discover the truth, and make more informed choices than you ever have before. In a similar way, your picking up this book is that first step.

The question, then, is this: How can this book help you to achieve a breakthrough? The answer is, by the very methods used in therapy. As you advance day to day, the assignments will make the same queries and probe for the same answers that a therapist would. Words—your words, your remembering and writing down your thoughts—are the crux of this book.

You get as much out of traditional therapy as you put into it. The same is true with this book. If you skim the pages while you're watching TV and snacking, don't

expect miracles. If you read carefully and jot down notes, seriously study your own thoughts as you would in a writing class, and question yourself with a view to doing a thorough examination of your thoughts, then you can expect to be both surprised and satisfied by what you discover, by finally knowing what actually makes you tick.

How, you might ask, can I be two people, both the therapist and the patient, the listener and the speaker? It's true that being an objective listener to your own story is difficult. You might not like what you're hearing, because in doing this work, you are going to have to learn to confront yourself, to pin yourself down when you are being belligerent, and to detect when you are hedging or lying.

The payoff is worth it. It is an incredibly satisfying moment when, in therapy, whether it's on the first day or in the first month, you realize something. It feels amazing to have one of those "Yes!" moments, when you jump up with your fist in the air. When you come across the answers that are important, you will feel it in your gut—undeniably.

The Rules

Every day you'll write in your journal for the same amount of time you would spend in a therapy session—forty-five minutes. The time of day is up to you. Are you more of a morning person? Is it easier to have uninterrupted "me time" in the evening, before going to bed? The key to picking your time is that for the next fourteen days, barring a fire in your building or your wife starting to have contractions, you have to keep your appointment. Momentum and the cumulative effect of doing this work every day are very important.

As you read this book, use the margins for writing notes whenever something catches your attention and really resonates with you; however, your journal is where you will expand and elaborate. Pick a very secure place to put your journal. Many a relationship has been ruined by a significant other reading something that his or her eyes weren't meant to see. If you are afforded the luxury of privacy, I suggest you keep your journal by your bedside at night.

Keep something to write on with you at all times in order to jot down notes during the day, then transfer them to your journal later or use them to start a new idea. Pick a space, a quiet spot in which to write, whether it's a room or a park. You should also write down your appointments with yourself. Yes, you do indeed make an appointment with yourself each day for the fourteen days. It isn't silly. Remember that you are following the same procedures as those used in clinical therapy, in which appointments, promptness, and commitment are key elements for success.

Here, in short, is the procedure you will follow:

1. This is a fourteen-day course. Every day counts. Commit to writing, even when you are tired, hung over, uninspired, or angry. It is exactly like going to the gym: you don't want to go, but you know you should; then you go, and you feel better.
2. This is a forty-five-minute session that is to be uninterrupted, just like a therapy session. In therapy, you are paying for every minute, even if you cancel or are late, so use every minute carefully. Guard the time of your appointment—it might be the most productive and meaningful forty-five minutes of your day. It's sacred. During your writing time, your door should

- be closed; do not peek out to see what's going on. Don't take phone calls, read text messages, or take coffee breaks. Do your business, and I mean *all* of your business, before you sit down for your session.
3. Write down *everything*, even if that means saying things that sound stupid, immature, egotistical, or rude. Let it all out. At times it may make no sense; at other times it may hurt or even shock you. You might repeat the same sentence over and over. It doesn't mean that you are unimaginative; it means that that particular sentence, that topic, or that issue is important.
 4. Make this commitment your mantra: "I need to do this seriously for the next fourteen days so that I can feel better and figure things out. This is essential to my mental health, which is linked to my physical health. This is probably the most important thing I will do today, no matter how trivial it seems. I can take forty-five minutes out of my day for me. I need to do this."
 5. Write down the ugly things. Use the strongest words that you know the topic deserves. People often don't write down their greatest fears because they think that giving them attention of any sort will make them happen or grow. This is not true. Don't be afraid to expand on the thought.
 6. Don't let yourself talk yourself out of it. You may know yourself better than anyone, but you are also your biggest saboteur. Don't tell yourself that this is not working, that it's too late, or that it's an exercise in futility. Prevail even if you still haven't had an "Aha!" moment. It will come to you when it is right, and that might just be tomorrow.

ASSIGNMENT

Make the commitment to self-therapy just as you would with a therapist. Actually write it down. Reread the six points above, if you need to—do it as many times as necessary to reinforce your commitment. For today, just see which of the following most common therapy questions resonate with you. The forty-five minutes of writing will start tomorrow.

Common Therapy Questions

Following are the twenty most common topics that are brought to therapy (with variations of each). As you read them, circle the ones that make you nod and say, “Yes, that’s me.”

1. How can I find something I can be truly excited about? How can I be more motivated? I feel stuck in life. I feel a lack of passion in my life for anything. I’m not sure I like who I’ve become. I want to be happy.
2. What is my purpose in life? Is there some goal that I should be striving for that will bring me more satisfaction in my life? I feel as if everything I have worked for is meaningless—I want to make a difference in the world.
3. Why is it so hard to forgive?
4. I have such low self-esteem; how do I learn to love myself more? I want to be more confident.
5. How do I achieve more balance in my life? It seems that once I get over one crisis, another arises. I want less drama in my life.

6. Can I reparent myself? My biological family is nuts, and I want to make a new family of my own. Can my friends really be the family I choose?
7. How do I pick better romantic partners? I'm always trying to fix the people I date. Can I get my significant other to change what seems to be ingrained behavior?
8. I can't seem to commit. At what point in a relationship should I know that it's time to break it off? I feel trapped in my relationship. I can't figure out if I should stay or go. I feel increasingly detached from my partner.
9. How do I get over the latest breakup? How do I get closure?
10. Why do I often get upset or angry over the small stuff?
11. Why do I feel so guilty when I make mistakes? Why do I beat myself up so much?
12. Why do I work so hard to avoid conflict? Why do I find it so hard to stand up for myself? I want to be more assertive.
13. Why do I find it so difficult to accept my parents for who they are?
14. How can I continue to work at a job that I hate? I need the money, but I want to change jobs. I'm scared.
15. Why do I have so many regrets? Have I made bad decisions?
16. Why do I feel so mortal, that life is passing me by? I'm scared of aging.
17. Why do I feel so anxious? I worry so much.

18. Why do I feel like crying all the time?
19. Why can't I find the reason for my headaches, backaches, or stomachaches?
20. Why do I compare myself to others so much? Why can't I accept myself as I am? How do others experience me?

Whether you circle 19 of these 20, or just one, these perplexing, even tormenting, questions can be unraveled. You don't have to live with the uncertainty forever. Let's get moving.