

Single Session Therapy
A Definition and Description
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Whether conducted at an office, clinic, hospital or home, a single session intervention occurs when a therapist and client meet for one and only one session for the purpose of addressing psychological, emotional, behavioural or family difficulties. Quite often single sessions occur without them being planned as such. In such cases clients make arrangements to see a therapist and after one session are unable or unwilling to return or feel that the single session was sufficient and choose not to return. Some consultations with a therapist are planned as single sessions, such as may occur at an emergency department or mobile clinic or as part of a crisis intervention at school. Whether planned or not some studies have shown that more than half of persons experience single sessions as helpful.

Though I have been involved with single session interventions my entire career, my most structured exposure to the model occurred when I briefly served on the child protection team at the Izaak Walton Killam Hospital for Children in Halifax, Nova Scotia (2006-2007). As a member of the team I developed a single session clinic to provide access to clinical consultation (therapy) for clients that were on the teams waiting list for more traditional therapy. In just a few months, the monthly clinic served more than a dozen clients who were presenting with a range of issues with their children and families. Only one of those families required or requested referral to longer term therapy.

I have continued to incorporate single session therapy as a regular part of my private practice. A typical session looks something like this:

Referral Process: Clients can request a single session intervention by simply calling my office during the day and requesting it. Office staff will take your contact information and I will call you back to settle on a time and location for the meeting. In preparation for the session I do not take an extensive history. I often ask people to answer just two questions: What is the problem you hope to address in therapy, and what would a solution look like from your perspective? You can provide my office staff with the answers to these questions in advance or simply be prepared to answer them when I contact you for appointment.

The Session: Readers of my website would be aware that I conduct therapy both at an office setting and at clients homes. We will discuss what will work best for you when I call you to arrange the appointment. The session can have several sections. These may include introduction, review of the problem or issue, brief history, questions for understanding and planning, planning and termination.

During the introduction phase of the session I'll introduce myself and the nature of therapy and single session work. This is particularly critical if this is a family session that involves children

that may not have been a part of the session planning.

During the problem/issue review I will re-state the topic that I believe we are scheduled to address if this was shared in advance of the session. If not I will ask each person the two questions: What is the problem and what would a solution look like? I have conducted single sessions with children as young as 4 years old in attendance. I will often ask children what they understand about why we are meeting and will engage them in the session through a variety of means including some play therapy techniques.

As we discuss and review the issue I will take a brief history of the family. I will ask about other important persons in the life of the family, community and other involvements, past problems the family has worked through, major medical issues and such.

The central part of the session is usually taken up with lots of questions and discussion aimed at better understanding the issues, the way we tend to heal, ways to support growth and change and the development of a plan that the client or family can use to support and promote healing. During this phase I provide a lot of information of a psycho-educational nature to help clients and families better understand their problem or issue within the context of what is known more generally about the issue. This often normalizes and provides a context for the family's issues in a way that many find comforting and helpful.

The final phase of single session therapy is planning and termination. During this phase I work with the client or family to summarize the key things that we discussed and to specifically list the strategies and activities that we agreed would best support growth and healing. Often I will take time during the session to write this out. I will often commit to follow up the session with a letter to the client or family outlining the plan.

I rarely schedule a second session during a single session (I have only done this once in the last 4 years). I will always remind clients that I am available however for future consultation either on a single session basis or a continuing basis depending on the need. Few clients have followed up a single session intervention with ongoing therapy for the same issue in my experience. On occasion I have had clients who attended for a single session on one issue (for example parenting issues with their teenage child) who would return later for ongoing therapy for another issue (relationship counselling involving their spouse or partner for example). It is sometimes the case that single session therapy helps people to be more open to and less intimidated by the idea of therapy. Often people will return in a few months for a single session on a related or completely different topic.

As is the case in all the clinical work I do, I will often follow up a single session with a phone

call in 3 or 4 months to see how people are doing.