

Supporting a Loved One in Therapy: Do's and Don'ts for Families

When someone you love begins therapy, your support can significantly influence their healing journey. Whether they're seeking help for depression, anxiety, trauma, addiction, or personal growth, how you respond matters. Family support—or lack thereof—can make the difference between someone continuing with therapy or giving up before experiencing its full benefits.

This guide will help you navigate your role as a supportive family member while respecting the therapeutic process and maintaining appropriate boundaries.

Understanding Your Role in the Therapeutic Process

As a family member or close friend, you occupy a unique position. You're not the therapist, but you're also not a distant observer. You're a key part of your loved one's environment and support system.

The Impact of Your Support

Research consistently shows that social support significantly improves therapy outcomes. People with supportive families are:

- More likely to continue therapy when it becomes challenging
- More willing to practice new skills outside therapy sessions
- More open about their struggles and progress
- More likely to maintain improvements after therapy ends

Your support doesn't just feel good—it creates tangible results.

What Therapy Is (and Isn't)

To support someone effectively, it helps to understand what therapy actually involves:

Therapy is:

- A professional relationship focused on specific goals
- A safe space to explore thoughts, feelings, and behaviors
- A collaborative process that requires active participation
- Work that often becomes more difficult before it gets easier

- A journey that looks different for everyone

Therapy isn't:

- A quick fix or magic solution
- Something that "fixes" a person who is "broken"
- Only for people with severe mental illness
- A sign of weakness or failure
- The therapist telling someone what to do

With this foundation in mind, let's explore specific ways to support—and not undermine—your loved one's therapeutic journey.

Do's: Effective Ways to Show Support

DO Respect Their Decision to Seek Help

Why it matters: Seeking therapy takes courage. Validating this choice reinforces that it's okay to ask for help.

How to do it:

- Express genuine appreciation for their decision
- Acknowledge the strength it takes to begin therapy
- Avoid statements that suggest therapy is a last resort or sign of failure
- Normalize therapy as a healthy form of self-care

Example: "I'm really proud of you for taking this step. I think it shows a lot of strength to invest in your mental health this way."

DO Learn About Their Specific Therapy

Why it matters: Different therapy approaches work differently. Understanding the basics helps you provide more informed support.

How to do it:

- Ask open questions about their therapy approach if they're comfortable sharing
- Do some basic research on their therapy type (CBT, DBT, EMDR, psychodynamic, etc.)
- Understand the typical timeline and process for their specific treatment
- Learn about common terminology they might use

Example: "I've been reading a little about cognitive behavioral therapy to understand what you're working on. It sounds like identifying thought patterns is a big part of it?"

DO Respect Confidentiality and Boundaries

Why it matters: Therapy is a private process. Respecting this privacy builds trust and allows your loved one to engage fully with treatment.

How to do it:

- Never pressure them to share what happens in therapy
- Don't ask for specific details about their sessions
- Respect if they need space after emotionally intense sessions
- Allow them to share only what they're comfortable discussing
- Keep what they do share confidential unless given permission to discuss with others

Example: "I'm always here to listen if you want to talk about anything from therapy, but I completely understand if you prefer to keep it private."

DO Create Space for New Behaviors and Skills

Why it matters: Therapy often involves developing new coping skills and changing relationship patterns. These changes need space to take root.

How to do it:

- Be patient with awkward attempts at new communication styles
- Respond positively to healthier boundary setting
- Adapt to new routines that support their mental health
- Allow for changes in relationship dynamics when they're healthier
- Recognize that change is difficult and takes practice

Example: "I notice you've been taking time for yourself in the evenings. Even though I miss our usual routine, I'm glad you're finding what works for you."

DO Offer Practical Support

Why it matters: Practical obstacles can prevent consistent therapy participation. Removing these barriers shows tangible support.

How to do it:

- Help with transportation to appointments if needed
- Assist with childcare during therapy sessions
- Remind them of appointments in a non-intrusive way if they struggle with organization
- Help research insurance coverage or financial assistance options
- Create space in the household schedule for therapy appointments

Example: "I'm happy to watch the kids every Thursday evening so you can make your therapy appointment without rushing."

DO Acknowledge Progress and Effort

Why it matters: Therapeutic change is often slow and incremental. Recognizing small steps reinforces progress.

How to do it:

- Notice and comment on positive changes without exaggerating
- Acknowledge the effort, not just the outcome
- Focus on specific behaviors rather than generalizations
- Recognize that progress isn't linear—two steps forward and one step back is still progress
- Celebrate milestones in ways that feel comfortable for them

Example: "I've noticed you've been speaking up more about your preferences lately. I know that's something you've been working on, and I really appreciate knowing what you want."

DO Take Care of Your Own Mental Health

Why it matters: Supporting someone in therapy can be emotionally demanding. Your wellbeing matters too.

How to do it:

- Consider your own therapy if you're struggling
- Maintain your own support network
- Set appropriate boundaries around what support you can offer
- Practice self-care consistently
- Join family support groups if relevant to your situation

Example: "I want to be here for you, and I've realized I need some support too. I've started talking with a therapist to help me process my own feelings about everything."

Don'ts: Common Pitfalls to Avoid

DON'T Minimize Their Struggles

Why it's harmful: Minimizing someone's pain invalidates their experience and can make them less likely to share in the future.

What to avoid:

- "It's not that bad" or "Others have it worse"
- "Just think positive" or "Just get over it"
- "You're too sensitive" or "You're overreacting"

- Comparing their struggles to others' experiences
- Rushing them to "feel better already"

Instead try: "I might not fully understand what you're going through, but I know it's really difficult for you, and your feelings matter."

DON'T Expect Immediate or Dramatic Changes

Why it's harmful: Unrealistic expectations create pressure and can make your loved one feel like they're failing if progress is slow.

What to avoid:

- Asking "Are you better yet?" after a few sessions
- Expressing disappointment when old patterns resurface
- Looking for dramatic transformations
- Expecting linear, consistent improvement
- Suggesting therapy isn't working if changes aren't immediately visible

Instead try: "I understand healing takes time. I'm here for the journey, however long it takes."

DON'T Undermine the Therapeutic Relationship

Why it's harmful: The relationship between client and therapist is a crucial element of effective therapy. Undermining it can derail progress.

What to avoid:

- Criticizing the therapist or their approach
- Suggesting the therapist doesn't know what they're doing
- Contradicting therapeutic recommendations
- Expressing skepticism about therapy to your loved one
- Making judgments about the pace or direction of therapy

Instead try: "It sounds like you and your therapist are working on some important things. What do you think about the approach you're taking together?"

DON'T Take Their Therapeutic Work Personally

Why it's harmful: Therapy often involves examining relationship patterns, including family dynamics. Taking this work personally can create defensive reactions that impede progress.

What to avoid:

- Becoming defensive if family patterns are discussed
- Interrogating them about what they've said about you

- Making their therapy about your feelings
- Punishing them for insights gained in therapy
- Taking it personally if they need to establish new boundaries

Instead try: "I know you might be discussing our family patterns in therapy. I want you to feel free to be honest there, even if it's sometimes hard for me to hear about."

DON'T Push for Details They Don't Want to Share

Why it's harmful: Pressuring someone to share beyond their comfort level violates their privacy and can damage trust.

What to avoid:

- Asking probing questions about therapy content
- Showing disappointment if they don't want to share
- Checking their therapy homework without permission
- Discussing their therapy with others without consent
- Reading their private therapy journals or notes

Instead try: "I'm interested in your experience if you ever want to share, but I completely respect if you prefer to keep it private."

DON'T Offer Unsolicited Advice

Why it's harmful: Unsolicited advice can undermine the therapeutic process and suggest you know better than the therapist.

What to avoid:

- Suggesting alternative approaches they should try
- Telling them what they "should" discuss in therapy
- Recommending they change therapists without being asked
- Offering solutions to problems they're working through in therapy
- Giving contradictory guidance to what their therapist suggests

Instead try: "It sounds like you're working through some complicated feelings. Would it help to talk about it, or would you prefer I just listen?"

DON'T Make Therapy a Taboo Topic

Why it's harmful: While respecting privacy is important, treating therapy as completely off-limits can reinforce stigma and isolation.

What to avoid:

- Never acknowledging they're in therapy
- Changing the subject if therapy is mentioned
- Looking uncomfortable when they reference their therapeutic work

- Treating therapy as a secret or shameful activity
- Avoiding them before or after sessions

Instead try: Creating an open but pressure-free environment: "I'm always happy to hear about therapy if you want to share, but never feel obligated."

Navigating Common Scenarios

When Therapy Brings Up Family Issues

It's common for therapy to illuminate family patterns or past experiences that may be uncomfortable to acknowledge. If your loved one begins addressing family dynamics:

Helpful responses:

- Listen without immediate defensiveness
- Acknowledge their perspective even if you remember things differently
- Be willing to examine your own behaviors and patterns
- Consider family therapy if appropriate and if they're interested
- Recognize that their healing may require acknowledging painful truths

Example: "I appreciate you sharing how that experience affected you. I may have seen it differently, but your feelings are valid, and I want to understand better."

When Progress Seems to Stall or Reverse

Therapy isn't always a straightforward path of improvement. There may be periods where your loved one seems stuck or even regresses:

Helpful responses:

- Maintain patience and consistent support
- Avoid expressing disappointment or frustration
- Remember that difficult periods often precede breakthroughs
- Continue acknowledging efforts rather than just results
- Ask how you can best support them during this challenging time

Example: "I know things feel really hard right now. What you're doing takes courage, and I'm here for you through the difficult parts too."

When You're Directly Affected by Their Work

Sometimes therapeutic work will directly impact you, especially if it involves setting new boundaries or changing relationship patterns:

Helpful responses:

- Be willing to adapt to healthier relationship dynamics
- Communicate openly about how changes affect you
- Respect new boundaries even if they're initially uncomfortable
- Focus on the long-term health of the relationship
- Consider your own therapy to navigate significant changes

Example: "I'm still adjusting to these changes in our relationship, but I can see they're healthy for you, and I'm committed to working through my own reactions."

Special Considerations

For Parents of Children in Therapy

Supporting a child in therapy involves some additional considerations:

- **Maintain appropriate involvement:** Stay engaged in the process while respecting the therapeutic relationship
- **Follow through on recommendations:** Consistently implement suggested strategies at home
- **Monitor without interrogating:** Show interest without pressuring for details
- **Address your own reactions:** Process your feelings with your own support system, not with your child
- **Prepare for family sessions:** Be open to feedback and willing to examine family patterns

For Partners of Adults in Therapy

Supporting a partner requires balancing closeness with respect for their individual journey:

- **Maintain emotional intimacy without overstepping:** Be close without smothering
- **Adjust expectations around availability:** Therapy may temporarily take emotional energy from the relationship
- **Navigate changes in relationship dynamics:** Be flexible as your partner grows and changes
- **Communicate about impacts on your relationship:** Discuss how therapy is affecting your connection
- **Consider couples therapy as an adjunct:** This can help integrate individual growth into the relationship

For Adult Children Supporting Parents in Therapy

When roles seem reversed and you're supporting a parent:

- **Navigate the role shift respectfully:** Support without parenting your parent
- **Acknowledge the courage it takes:** Recognize that seeking help may be especially difficult for older generations
- **Respect generational differences:** Understand that views on mental health may differ across generations
- **Maintain appropriate boundaries:** Support without taking responsibility for their healing
- **Address your own feelings about their growth:** Process complex emotions about changes in your parent

Creating a Supportive Home Environment

Beyond your direct interactions about therapy, the general home environment can either support or hinder therapeutic progress.

Physical Environment

- **Create space for therapeutic homework:** Ensure there's a private area for reflection or exercises
- **Reduce chaos and unpredictability:** Maintain reasonable routines and structure
- **Accommodate specific needs:** Make adjustments for sensory sensitivities or other considerations
- **Support healthy habits:** Facilitate good sleep, nutrition, and exercise, which complement therapy
- **Minimize exposure to triggers when possible:** Be mindful of media consumption, visitors, or activities that might be destabilizing

Emotional Environment

- **Practice non-judgmental communication:** Create safety for expressing feelings
- **Model healthy emotional expression:** Demonstrate appropriate ways to share and process emotions
- **Reduce high emotional intensity:** Minimize shouting, volatile arguments, or emotional extremes
- **Acknowledge all feelings as valid:** Avoid dismissing or punishing emotional expression
- **Create space for both connection and autonomy:** Balance togetherness with respect for individual needs

Conclusion: The Ripple Effect of Support

When you effectively support someone in therapy, the benefits extend beyond that individual. As they heal and grow, your relationship with them improves. As your relationship improves, the entire family system becomes healthier. And as families heal, communities grow stronger.

Your supportive role may sometimes feel invisible or underappreciated, but it creates profound ripple effects. By providing thoughtful, boundaried support, you're not just helping your loved one—you're contributing to a cycle of healing that extends far beyond what you can see.

Remember that you don't need to provide perfect support. Being consistently present, respectful, and willing to learn is what matters most. With patience and compassion—both for your loved one and yourself—you can be an invaluable ally on their journey toward mental health and wellbeing.

Additional Resources for Families

Books:

- *I Am Not Sick, I Don't Need Help!* by Xavier Amador (for supporting those with serious mental illness)
- *The Family Guide to Mental Health Care* by Lloyd Sederer
- *When Someone You Love Has Depression* by Laura Epstein Rosen and Xavier Francisco Amador
- *Loving Someone with Anxiety* by Kate N. Thieda

Organizations:

- National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Family Support Groups
- Mental Health America Family and Friends Support Resources
- American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (for finding family therapists)

Online Resources:

- NAMI Family-to-Family Education Program
 - Psychology Today's Family resources
 - Mental Health First Aid training
-

© *Aspire Impact Network*

Empowering individuals. Elevating communities. Creating impact.