

MY THERAPY:

WHY I FEEL IT'S BEEN REALLY **GOOD** FOR ME

My mother and father don't believe in therapy, not unless you actually hear voices. Unfortunately, I don't. Nor do I see apparitions, think strange men are following me—except when it turns out they really *are*—or talk to myself in the street. I do work I like (and I actually get paid for it), I love my family, enjoy sex, do laundry. A pretty normal life.

So when I am anxious, panicky or depressed for no apparent reason, when I feel totally alone all of a sudden, afraid of the future, when I believe myself to be an unutterable failure or simply a bad person, my parents think that, being basically intelligent, I should be able to handle it myself. They can't understand why I am seeing a therapist.

My parents are not alone. For some inexplicable reason, we Americans expect a person who has been crippled by a broken leg to ask for care, but begrudge someone seeking help for a crippled mind. From the rich, self-indulgent frustrated matrons of the thirties movies visiting oily, self-serving psychiatrists, to the complaints of Portnoy in the sixties, people seeking relief from mental anguish have invariably looked silly, spoiled and selfish.

I have come to accept that for as long as I am in by *Bette-Jane Raphael*

therapy this is the way I will appear to some people, even if they otherwise love me and care about me. It's okay. I know that what I am doing is good and right for me—not for everybody, but for me. My therapy is as much a part of my growth as my family, my work and my friends. It is expensive. It is time-consuming. It is hard work. It is worth it.

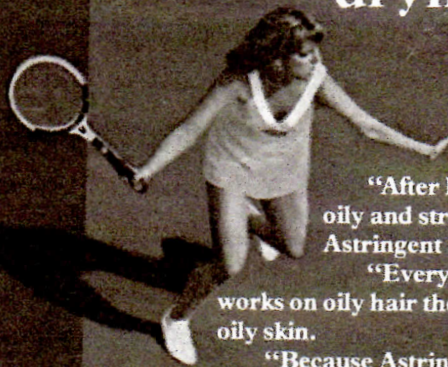
What do I actually do between the hours of one and two most Monday and Thursday afternoons when I could (and *should*, according to my Aunt Ellen) be eating a chef's salad with a friend or, better still, trying on shoes? Nothing very mysterious. I'm not in a trance or looking for hidden meanings in ink spots. I'm not even beating up a pillow substitute for my mother. (I actually *like* my mother, a fact that non-therapy-goers seem to believe bars a person from treatment.)

What I'm doing, most of the time, is talking: about the things that are bothering me, or making me happy; about the people I love, and the people I hate, and the troubles I am having with one or the other or both; about the difficulties—and the triumphs—I am having with work and relationships; about feelings of inadequacy or (less often) pride and achievement.

Chris Evert for Everynight Astringent Shampoo.



“It super cleans oily hair without drying it out.”



“After I play tennis, my hair feels oily and stringy. I use Everynight Astringent Shampoo to get the oil out.

“Everynight Astringent Shampoo works on oily hair the way astringents work on oily skin.

“Because Astringent Shampoo has oil removers, it actually blots up the excess oil. But it doesn't dry out my hair. It comes out soft and shiny and full of body and highlights.

“With Astringent Shampoo, my hair feels cleaner, longer. I really like it. I really use it.”

HELENE CURTIS



When you do enough talking about the people and events of your life, especially to someone trained to help you hear what you're saying and the meanings that words sometimes mask, a funny thing begins to happen. Patterns of feelings and behavior start to emerge. Seemingly unrelated happenings begin to show a connection. You find you are not an oddly assorted tang'le of neurotic threads, but a carefully, a bit not flawlessly, woven tapestry whose pattern is anything but haphazard. This is pretty heady stuff.

I guess I always believed something of the kind, which is why I chose one-to-one therapy and why I have always been suspicious of group solutions or easy cure-alls that supposedly fit everyone. I'm too special for that. We all are. It's as though we were one-of-a-kind locks which need an intricate key to open, a key unique to each of us and one which we must forge bit by bit ourselves.

I found a piece of my key, partially opened my lock, one morning last March as I stepped out of the shower. I reached for the towel and started to dry myself. As I bent down to my legs I stopped. I suddenly saw my pudgy six-year-old self, hands on hips, a determined stomach stuck out over two legs planted firmly apart, my upturned face a stony challenge. I was defying a weary babysitter who had told me I couldn't stay up past nine o'clock. "I'm allowed," I told her. "I am. I'm allowed."

As I straightened, the image faded. But the words remained, and there, twenty-five years later, they suddenly took on a new meaning. I looked at myself in the mirror and said them aloud with excitement.

"I'm allowed." And I realized I was. Allowed not only to stay up until I felt like going to bed, but sometimes to be wrong, occasionally silly, often lazy, periodically messy, dull now and again—in other words, human and imperfect. For a woman who could never forgive herself her own flaws, that realization was a milestone on the road to self-acceptance.

"I'm allowed." I have used the expression often in the last year, catching myself at one of those times when I mentally take out a baseball bat and proceed to hit myself over the head with it for some believed wrongdoing or inadequacy. It has given me—if not absolutism—peace.

The last time the phrase came to my rescue was a couple of weeks ago. I hadn't seen my therapist that day, had canceled my appointment at the last minute—for what I felt was a good reason—and we had argued on the phone about it. I had put down the receiver knowing she was angry, knowing I was angry (at myself or at her, I couldn't decide). That afternoon I couldn't concentrate on anything else. I castigated myself, for, true to form, I had decided that I was the one in the wrong, and debated whether to call her or to live in guilt and fear until I saw her the following Monday.

Then it occurred to me that I had a third choice. I could simply accept the fact that, even if I had done something dumb, it did not necessarily make me a terrible person. I could forget it. There would be time enough to deal with it when I saw my therapist again. I felt myself relaxing as the thought took hold. I had allowed myself to be imperfect, and (Continued)

"If you've got dry or heat-styled hair, don't just shampoo. Moisturize, too."

"My hair gets dry from blow drying, electric rollers and the sun."

"That's why I use new Everynight Moisturizing Shampoo."

"It softens and conditions my dry hair the same way moisturizers soften and condition dry skin."

"With Everynight Moisturizing Shampoo, my hair looks and feels so soft and full—it almost seems too good to be my hair."



Chris' teammate, Kristien Shaw, for new Everynight Moisturizing Shampoo.



it felt good.

It was fitting that the episode had involved my therapist, because the way I handled it was a direct result of our work together. The subject of my own impossible demands on myself had been a constantly recurring theme in our sessions. I had been seeing her once or twice a week for about three years, depending on how urgent I felt the need to change my patterns of behavior, or to vent my anger and hurt at what I perceived to be the perfidy of people and fate, or to hear the advice of someone I trusted implicitly, or simply to talk to a woman with whom I felt totally comfortable.

She respects me, even likes me (is that really possible, I ask myself in dark moments), and she talks to me about the things that matter to us both. She shares with me the anger I sometimes express, and she pays me the compliment of getting angry at me. We laugh together, cry sometimes and sometimes she just holds me, if that's my need. Our relationship is a microcosm of my relationships outside her office, and what I learn about recognizing and accepting my feelings, even when they are unpretty and thus unacceptable (or so I was brought up to believe) and asking her to accept them, I can then transfer to the world outside her office.

Our relationship, like any other, constantly shifts and redefines itself according to what is important at the moment. So it was that on a day several weeks ago

when I was feeling frightened and unsure of where I wanted to go after our time together, I sat in her kitchen sipping sherry while she washed dishes. We didn't talk of my problems then; we joked and chatted, but she was my therapist just the same because, knowing I needed her, she was making herself available to me, in an unorthodox, but human, way. She accepted my fear not as something shameful, but as something normal, ordinary, even humdrum, and so I accepted it too. Ten minutes later I was ready to leave. This too is therapy.

Two years ago I couldn't have asked if I could sit in her kitchen. I would have thought, "Now she will know that I am a coward, unworthy." Today I know that the uncowardly, the unhealthy thing, would be not to reach out to her and to others in my life. I am no longer ashamed to let people know when I am needy.

When I first talked to her, I didn't feel that way, but she gave me a real permission to be me, a permission which at that time I rarely gave myself. I felt relaxed, accepted, free of the demand to perform. And what she said made sense to me. I knew I wanted to see her again.

And again and again. Therapy is not for the impatient. It is not, as I would sometimes have it, a continual string of blinding revelations which send me forth from each session a new and finer person. It's more of a two-steps-forward-one-step-back affair. There are stretches when the connections are unaccountably blocked, the insights stubbornly elusive, the whole process discouraging. And even when the insights are found, they

often prove to be no protection against recidivist folly. Sometimes there's little but silence for an entire session, and while she can help me listen to that silence and find out where it's coming from, that, too, can be discouraging.

But then, just when I think it makes no sense at all, something happens, something I do right which I have always done wrong before, something makes sense that never made sense before. There are very few things as sweet.

Depending on how often I go, my therapy costs me an average of \$2,500 a year. This is a lot of money, and some of my friends wonder why I am willing to spend it. I am willing because my inner growth is incredibly important to me. It is more important than new carpeting or fur coats or trips to Mexico. Because whatever I walk on, whatever I wear, wherever I go, I take myself along. And if I'm not happy with me, enjoying anything else is really not very possible.

I wish I could say that I am now happy, healthy and wise. That I am rich, beautiful, famous and universally loved. I am none of these things, however, and if I had gone into therapy expecting them, I would be an angry, disappointed woman. I am not that either. What I am is happier, healthier and wiser than I was before. I am more loving—of myself and of others. I am more accepting—of myself and of others. I am kinder. For me, that's a pretty good deal.

Editor's note: Bette-Jane Raphael is a magazine editor and free-lance writer who lives in New York City.

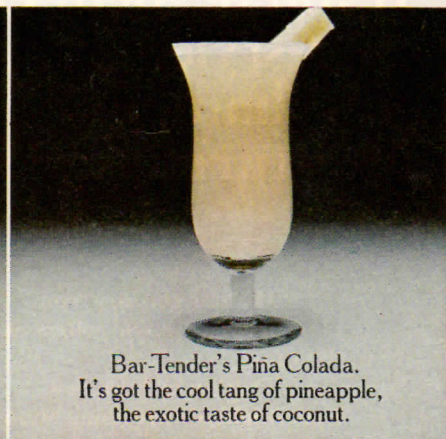
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