

Building Trust and Safety in Therapy

Objective

To increase trust and feelings of safety in therapy and identify ways to foster a deep connection with your therapist.

What to Know

Starting therapy marks the beginning of a process where you seek support and guidance to cope with your challenges. Part of this process is building trust with your therapist, which can sometimes feel difficult.

Trust is the cornerstone of the therapeutic relationship. It facilitates open communication and vulnerability necessary for recovery and healing. Establishing trust requires time, effort, and a leap of faith.

Building trust involves creating a trusting, safe, and supportive environment where you feel comfortable sharing your experiences and feelings. While you may feel nervous about opening up to someone you do not know, it is essential to recognize these feelings are natural.

Many factors can affect your ability to trust your therapist. Past experiences of betrayal or trauma, cultural norms, societal attitudes toward mental health, and previous negative therapy experiences can all play a role.

Your therapist may try to build trust by demonstrating empathy, respect, and understanding. They aim to create a space where you feel heard and valued through active listening, validating feelings, and transparent communication. Over time, as the therapeutic relationship develops and you begin to feel more comfortable, trust can deepen, paving the way for progress and growth.

If you are holding back in therapy sessions, trust may be lacking. Check off any of the statements that apply to you.

Limited Disclosure. You are hesitant to share specific thoughts, feelings, or experiences with your therapist, leading to incomplete or guarded communication during sessions.

Avoidance of Vulnerable Topics. You avoid topics that trigger strong emotions or discomfort, preferring to focus on surface-level issues or less challenging subjects.

Minimal Engagement. You passively participate in sessions, providing superficial responses or one-word answers to your therapist's questions without exploring underlying concerns or experiences.

Resistance to Feedback. You react defensively or dismissively to your therapist's feedback or insights, resisting introspection or exploring alternative perspectives.

Reluctance to Explore Past Trauma. You are unwilling to explore past traumas or painful experiences, fearing emotional overwhelm or re-traumatization.

____ **Dishonesty or Concealment.** You withhold essential information or present a curated version of yourself, fearing judgment or rejection.

____ **Difficulty Establishing Boundaries.** You struggle to assert your boundaries or advocate for your needs, leading to discomfort or resentment.

____ **Inconsistency in Attendance or Engagement.** You frequently cancel or reschedule therapy appointments or express disinterest in engaging in recommended therapeutic homework or exercises.

If you resonate with any of these statements, it is important to explore the underlying reasons for your hesitation or reluctance to engage in therapy. Honestly discussing your concerns with your therapist can help address any trust issues and facilitate a more collaborative and productive therapeutic relationship.

Be open with your therapist about your feelings, including lack of trust. Therapy is a collaborative process; your therapist supports you, even during difficult conversations. Your therapist can help you explore the reasons behind your mistrust, address misunderstandings or concerns, and work with you to rebuild trust.

How can you build trust with your therapist? Here are some tips.

Openly Communicate. Be honest and transparent with your therapist about your thoughts, feelings, and concerns. This will foster understanding and strengthen the therapeutic relationship. For example, instead of minimizing your symptoms, openly discuss the extent of your struggles, including how they impact your life and relationships.

Establish Boundaries. Clearly define your boundaries and preferences to create a sense of safety and trust. For example, if specific topics make you uncomfortable, tell your therapist and discuss alternate approaches.

Offer Feedback. Provide constructive feedback to your therapist about what is helpful or challenging for you. This ensures your needs are met and builds mutual trust. For example, if you find a particular therapeutic approach ineffective or triggering, share this with your therapist so adjustments can be made.

Set realistic expectations. Building trust takes time and patience, so be realistic about progress and allow yourself to develop trust gradually. Rather than expecting to trust your therapist after just a few sessions, acknowledge that trust is built over time through consistent communication and positive therapeutic experiences.

Explore past experiences. Discuss any past experiences or traumas impacting your ability to trust others. Understanding the root of trust issues can help address them effectively in therapy. For example, if you have a history of betrayal in past relationships, explore how these experiences influence your trust in others and work with your therapist to build a sense of safety and reliability.

Be patient with yourself. Building trust requires patience and self-compassion. Allow yourself the time to feel comfortable opening up. Remember, it is expected to feel hesitant or guarded in the beginning stages of therapy, so permit yourself to make progress at your own pace.

Celebrate progress. Acknowledge small milestones in your trust-building journey. Recognizing progress can boost confidence and motivation to continue working toward deeper trust. If you notice yourself becoming more open and vulnerable in therapy sessions, take a moment to acknowledge and appreciate your growth.

Implementing these tips can help you build a trusting and supportive relationship with your therapist, fostering an environment conducive to personal growth and healing.

As you engage in open and honest communication, set boundaries, and work collaboratively with your therapist, you will gradually feel more secure and comfortable sharing your thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

This worksheet will help you explore your personal definitions of trust and safety within the therapeutic relationship. By clearly identifying what these terms mean to you, you can better communicate your boundaries and needs, which in turn helps your therapist to create a more tailored therapeutic approach.

What to Do

What does trust mean to you? Describe in your own words what trust looks like in any relationship, including with your therapist.

Think about a past experience where you felt trust was well established. What factors contributed to this feeling of trust?

Which of the factors you listed above is most important in the relationship with your therapist?
Why?

What does safety mean to you? Define what feeling safe looks like in various settings. What makes a space or interaction feel safe to you?

What specific conditions do you need in therapy to feel safe?

How might you communicate your safety needs to your therapist? What would make you feel comfortable sharing these needs?

Based on your answers, list three actionable steps to help build trust and safety in your therapeutic relationship.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

What actions or behaviors do you hope to see from your therapist that would help you build trust and feel safe?

How would you like to give and receive feedback with your therapist? Consider the best ways for you to communicate openly and effectively.

Use the following chart over the next three months. Note the date and topics discussed in each session. Write down your level of trust with your therapist, where 1 = I completely distrust my therapist, to 10 = I trust my therapist completely. Then, rate how safe you feel with your therapist, where 1 = I don't feel safe at all, and 10 = I feel completely safe with my therapist. Finally, note what your therapist could have done to increase your feelings of safety and/or trust in each session.

Date	Topic	Trust (1-10)	Safety (1-10)	Therapist Role

Date	Topic	Trust (1-10)	Safety (1-10)	Therapist Role

After completing this activity, do you trust your therapist? Do you feel safe within the therapeutic relationship? Why or why not?

Reflections on This Exercise

Did anything surprise you about this exercise? If so, describe.

How helpful was this exercise? _____
 (1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?
