How Long Will It Take For Treatment To Work?

The length of treatment for psychological problems will necessarily vary from one individual to another. Essentially, the treatment (type and duration) should always be matched appropriately to the nature and severity of the person's presenting difficulties. Acute difficulties usually require fewer treatment sessions than do chronic conditions. Moreover, length of treatment also varies with the type of treatment provided; cognitive behavioral treatments which focus on a specific problem are generally briefer than are psychotherapies with a broader focus.

It is important to consider the following when determining the length of treatment:

- Therapy successfully ends when the patient has accomplished the goals mutually agreed upon with the therapist.
- Discussion of treatment length should be part of your conversation with the therapist.
- Treatment length is often tentative and revisited throughout the course of treatment.
- It is common for therapists to conduct several assessment or evaluation sessions before suggesting a treatment plan or to request a trial length of treatment at which time the needs for treatment will be reassessed. In some cases, additional, sequential treatment goals are then negotiated.
- Research has generally found a positive relationship between treatment length and clinical outcomes such that more individuals will show significant change or recovery with increasing treatment length. It is therefore important that you have a sufficient amount of treatment and reasonable expectations for treatment length before deciding treatment is not working.

So how long does it typically take for treatment to work?

- Recent research indicates that on average 15 to 20 sessions are required for 50% of patients to recover as indicated by self-reported symptom measures.
- There are a growing number of specific psychological treatments of moderate duration (e.g., 12 to 16 weekly sessions) that have been scientifically shown to result in clinically significant improvements.
- In practice, patients and therapists sometimes prefer to continue treatment over longer periods (e.g., 20 to 30 sessions over six months), to achieve more complete symptom remission and to feel confident in the skills needed to maintain treatment gains.
- Clinical research evidence suggests that people with co-occurring conditions or certain personality difficulties may require longer treatment (e.g., 12-18 months) for therapy to be effective. There are a few individuals with chronic problems who may require extensive treatment support (e.g., maintenance therapy to reduce risk of psychiatric re-hospitalization), but such patients are a minority of those who need or seek treatment.

If you believe there is insufficient progress after a reasonable period of treatment, it is always appropriate to discuss your treatment with another therapist and/or request a re-evaluation of the treatment plan with your therapist to assure that treatment is on track and helpful to you.