

Staying Safe Between Therapy Sessions by Sara Lambert

I have had just about every variation of weekly session scheduling possible over the past five and a half years, and it is from this personal experience that I write the following article. I started therapy with one hour-long session per week, then moved to twice a week (with emergency provision for one extra) at the suggestion of my therapist, who was probably more nervous about my "emergency stage" process than I! I also spent months having three hour-long sessions a week with, at times, phone calls to my therapist during the weekend and on days when I needed extra support. I now have one two-hour session per week due to restrictions on my therapist's availability. (I should also mention that, from beginning therapy to this date, I've had a number of different therapists, so the change in session scheduling is not a natural progression.)

In my opinion, one session per week is not enough for a multiple, especially if that session is a "fifty minute hour". Within one session there is simply not enough time for dissociative defenses to be addressed at a safe and gentle pace, nor for everyone inside to have their say. Furthermore, the pressure during the week, waiting for the session, knowing you only have one hour to talk about everything that so desperately needs to be said, tends to reach critical point in the first five minutes of that session. Many times I have been struck dumb by the pressure of the time limit and have spent the first half of the hour struggling to speak, and the last half crying because I know it will soon be time to leave. Also, because the hour is so precious, any delays, such as the therapist arriving late or being interrupted during the session can lead to serious damage to the therapeutic alliance. And a cancelled session can be downright dangerous to the safety of the client, let alone the sense of trust she has in the therapist.

I also have some doubts about the wisdom of meeting three times a week for therapy, except during difficult periods. I will remain forever grateful that I had the opportunity to do this, and I credit most of my healing to date to being able to focus so much on recovery issues within the safety of a three-session weekly schedule.

But, when I left that set-up, I realised just how focussed my energies had been on therapy, to the exclusion of almost everything else. For the three days on which I had a session, I spent the morning preparing for it, the afternoon recovering from it, and then I spent the days in between either processing the previous session or planning for the next. The two days break during the weekend was quite painful. For this reason, I do not think I would return to a three-session week again - although, having said that, it should be noted that I am through the most critical stage of my therapy process, and have enough internal and external resources so that therapy is no longer the thing that gets me through my life.

Two sessions per week is my ideal, each session being two hours in length, with provision for emergency phone contact with the therapist during the week. In my opinion, this arrangement takes away the panic of time limits, provides a good safety container, and allows plenty of time for everyone to have their say, but does not take over the client's entire life nor foster their dependence on the therapist. Of course, my ideal is not necessarily the same for other people, and it is certainly not possible at all in many cases.

Whatever schedule you have, there will inevitably be times when the period between sessions will be too long, and I believe this would be the case even if you had sessions every day. So how do you survive between sessions, let alone have any quality of life?

The bottom line is, of course, that you just do. You drag yourself through the time in whatever way possible. But I would like to share with you some things that might make the waiting period easier and safer for you, as they did for me and other survivors I know. I am aware that lists of suggestions are not always so helpful or necessarily relevant to you, especially because they are not a "quick fix". But unfortunately this healing process involves a hell of a lot of hard work on our part. We can't just wish it away; we can't expect to be rescued. We have to do most of it ourselves. And, in the end, the hard work is worth it. Knowing that I got myself through the dark times has given me an incredible sense of self-respect and a confidence that, come what may, I will find a way to cope.

The thing that helped me most of all to survive inter-session time was keeping a notebook in which all my selves could write. I gave up journaling because it was too intense for me, but still allowed people the chance to communicate through this notebook. We would write down important issues that came up for us and, on the night before a session, would get together to look over what we had written, prioritise the problems, and compose a schedule for the session. Our therapy was guided by the schedules we took in to each session. We were constantly amazed by the wisdom our system showed in directing our own path for healing. We knew what we needed for ourselves and, by listening to our own voices (and, thankfully, having a therapist who did the same) we made incredible progress in a relatively short period of time.

It also helped tremendously when we put aside ten or fifteen minutes each session for individual selves to come out and do their own thing, regardless of whatever else was going on at the time. In this way, we ensured everyone got a chance to be heard and, for those whose turn it was next session, they could spend the intervening time planning what they wanted to do in therapy. Thus there was always a sense of excitement, happiness and anticipation leading up to a session. And we were constantly reminded that, despite all the turmoil going on in our life, we weren't just all about crisis, chaos, and sexual abuse memories.

Homework is another helpful technique for staying focussed and safe. However, I strongly believe each project should be decided on by the client, albeit with help and suggestions from the therapist. For a therapist to tell a client what to do for homework further tips the power balance in favour of the therapist and, again, encourages the client's sense of dependance on the therapist.

Homework may involve writing stories about memories, feelings, past experiences or future dreams; it may be to take one small risk and record what happened and how it felt; it may be to do some artwork or draw a systems map.

Artwork can be an excellent way of spending inter-session time, although there is the danger it will get you in touch with feelings or memories that you are not able to deal with, and so cause more problems than benefits. I would recommend artwork done on your own to be an expressive and containing exercise, rather than explorative, which may be safer to do in therapy. Thus you could draw different selves in your system, new feelings that you have come to know, beautiful things in the world around you, and so on. Other creative projects include making toys for the children, baking, gardening, and whatever else makes you concentrate on positive energy and hope.

Self-therapy techniques can also help you to develop a sense that you are in control of your healing, and that you have the strength and intelligence to explore yourselves and meet new challenges. Such techniques may include keeping a dream journal, practicing self-massage, or trying out new things like aromatherapy.

Getting support from areas apart from therapy is highly recommended. You could join a support group, go to massage, arrange a support network amongst your friends, go to church, visit your doctor/psychiatrist if required, and so on.

Having something interesting to do at the midpoint between your sessions is also a good idea. Thus, if you go to therapy on Monday and Thursday, you could attend an adult education course or support group on Tuesday night and make a regular date to go to the cinema on Saturday night. I think it is important to have a life besides therapy, to whatever degree you can manage that, and particularly to involve yourself with things not related to sexual abuse healing. For some, this may mean attending an eating disorders group or seeing a bodywork practitioner, so that they are still working on their recovery on a more multi-faceted level. Others may be interested in learning about dance, going to the gym, or enriching their creative skills through a self-improvement course. Trying out different types of sexual abuse therapy techniques can also be interesting and helpful. You might like to attend a psychodrama group or buy/borrow books which describe different methods of recovery work.

You may also be interested in volunteering as a telephone counsellor, tutor at your local school - or in furthering your own education on a part-time basis. If you are session-hopping (ie, just going from session-to-session and simply trying to survive in between) then having more activities from which to hop between means you have less time just waiting.

If you are triggered between sessions, as will inevitably happen, one way of containing this is to keep a record of what is happening. Try to trace back to what triggered you, and write down why you think it was triggering, how it affected you, what you did to help yourself, and what you needed to do but could not. I also recommend that people use their natural dissociative skills to contain memories and strong feelings until they can be dealt with safely in therapy. So, for example, you may put a new memory in an imaginary box and hold it there until it can be opened during your session.

It is wise to develop a support network that you can call on when you're having a hard time, and figure out who is the best person to talk to about certain things at certain times. Calling a pragmatic friend for emotional support when you're having a flashback would not be helpful, and calling your therapist when you're just having a shitty day would not be helpful either. For many survivors, their support network may be tiny, perhaps only their therapist. If this is the case with you, then you may want to consider what other support services are available to you, such as the *Samaritans*, *SAFE*, *Childline*, *Rape Crisis*, any local/national mental health crisis lines or even just arranging with your therapist that you can ring her answering machine when you need to and listen to her recorded voice to remind you that she is with you in spirit. You may also want to have an agreement with a pen pal that you write one letter a week, so you know someone is keeping check of you - or make a phone or email pal with another survivor. *If you have internet access you might like to get involved in some of the forums for dissociators and other survivors. You might even consider writing/drawing for First Person Plural regularly - perhaps responding to another readers request for help/information.*

If you are finding it really hard to stay safe between therapy sessions, there is probably a message in that which you need to pay attention to. Some questions to ask include, Are you going too fast in therapy and your system can't cope? Have you stalled? Do you need more sessions? Do you need fewer sessions? Are you being heard by your therapist? Is there someone inside who really needs to say or do something but hasn't been given (or taken) the chance to do that? Are you ignoring your other selves and not giving them enough body time?

Fear is often behind the feeling of desperation that rises up between sessions - for example, fear that your therapist will not be there at the next session, fear that you are going to go crazy, fear that you won't be able to control your other selves or your wish to die. By finding ways to encourage your own sense of confidence and bravery, you will be able to ease some of this fear, becoming less frantically dependant on your therapist and actually enjoy time outside therapy. It does take a while to reach this stage, because it requires the certainty gained through experience. But eventually it will happen and then you will be truly beyond just surviving - you will be living your life and thriving. ■

**This article first appeared in Team Spirit.
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Sections in italics are amendments/additions made by the Editor to reflect differences between NZ and GB crisis services or offer additional suggestions