

# Mind Games

*ASF* ponders how therapy may work for you.

**T**here is a stigma associated with “therapy.” Right now, an image flashed through your head of a patient lying on a sofa while a doctor, taking notes in the chair behind you, nods his head and tells you to “go on.” I bet you think that patient is weak for pouring out his feelings to a doctor, too. But if, like most readers of *ASF*, you exercise and eat a healthy diet, doing all you can to take care of your body, what happens when the mind isn’t being cared for? Considering that stress and depression can wreak havoc on the body, maybe it’s time to consider getting help to ease your troubled mind.

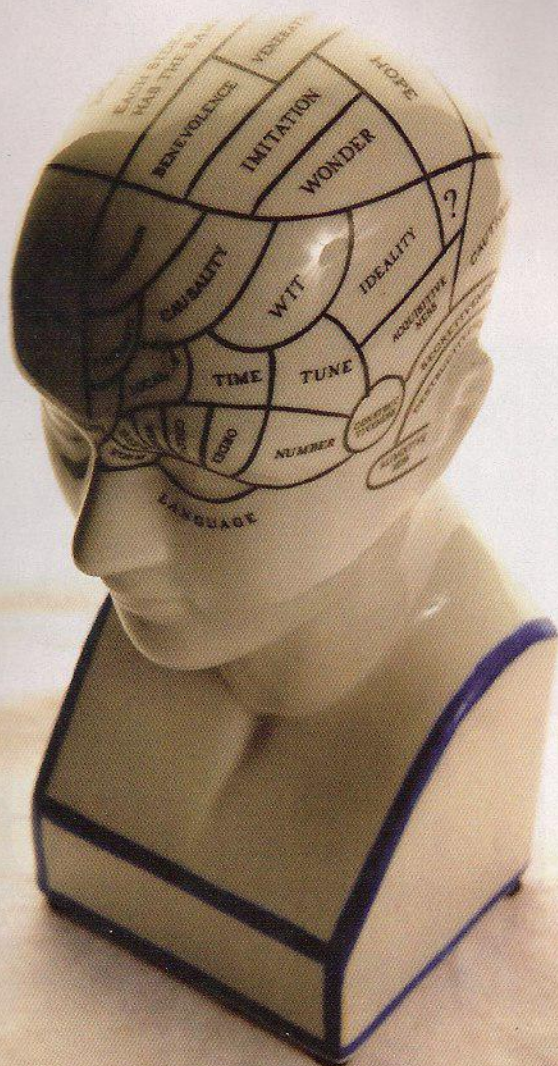
## Stress Hurts

“People seek therapy to overcome personal obstacles, relationship issues, loss or trauma, all of which can cause extreme stress,” says psychologist Mary Gresham, Ph.D., who operates a private practice in Atlanta. “About a third of Americans are living with extreme

stress, and half of Americans think their amount of stress has increased in the last five years. The leading cause of stress being money and work problems and relationship difficulties.”

That’s not good considering that high levels of stress have been found to weaken the immune system and leave you more prone to infections, cause a stomachache or diarrhea, stop you from getting a good night’s sleep, raise your heart rate and increase blood pressure, and even cause your skin to break out, or if you’re really lucky, speed up the aging process on your body and face.

Throw depression into the mix and there are more sleep problems, increased risk of heart disease and physical pain. If either are causing you physical problems, disturbing sleep, increasing irritability and anger, decreasing appetite and sex drive or increasing blood pressure, a visit to a therapist can help you conquer your stress levels and get your mind—as well as your body—back to fighting condition.



## Creating Peace of Mind

Many people trying to overcome an exercise plateau will boost their workouts and maybe seek the assistance of a personal trainer. When diet is not bringing about weight loss, they may turn to a nutritionist to develop a better eating plan. So when a person is going through a particularly tough time, say a divorce, a therapist can help him or her get over the hurdles.

Yes, talking about your problems will be a part of the program, but therapists also can help create a plan of attack, hitting the physical, emotional and mental realm of the problem. "A physical technique, for example, would be to learn how to breathe correctly, because breathing can be a big part of physical health, and many people are unaware that when they are under emotional distress, they start to breathe incorrectly and it starts

to increase anxiety," Gresham says. "In the mental realm, we'll identify thoughts that are causing a lot of stress, and we'll analyze those thoughts and find different ways of thinking. An example of dysfunctional thinking is what we call 'black or white thinking.' 'Either this has to happen or my whole life is a disaster.' We teach them not to think in black and white and that there are many possible outcomes."

For those looking for the mind connection needed to continue a healthy lifestyle, life coaches such as licensed well-coach Ron Jones, also an American College of Sports Medicine health and fitness instructor and USA Cycling coach based in Atlanta, can focus specifically on fitness and dietary goals. Jones works with clients to set goals, relax and focus on their health while overcoming weight-loss obstacles.

"It's all about what you want and how to achieve your goals and get over your own self-imposed hurdles," adds Jennifer Beard, an Atlanta life coach, licensed well-coach and certified personal trainer.

Thankfully, that image of a patient on a sofa isn't what you'll find when visiting a therapist to work through your issues. Plan to sit opposite your doctor or counselor in a comfortable, one-on-one environment while learning how to move through a difficult or stressful time, as well as how to better manage your stress in the future. Your body will thank you for it. —Lissa Poirot

## Meet Your Doctor

Therapists come with a variety of backgrounds that distinguish one from another. Psychiatrists, for example, are doctors of medicine and can prescribe medication to help a patient decrease anxiety and depression. Psychologists are Ph.D.s who work with patients on quality-of-life issues, and have eight to 10 years of training, while counselors may offer similar services, with only two to three years of professional training. Life and wellness coaches aren't treating patients but rather clients as facilitators and offering goal encouragement.

To find a qualified, licensed professional, Gresham recommends visiting Psychology Today's Web site, [psychologytoday.com](http://psychologytoday.com), which only lists therapists who have licenses in their own state. From there, you can search by price, specialty, locale and profession. When selecting a therapist, a face-to-face meeting is recommended, so you may determine if the chemistry is right. If you don't like the person you are speaking to, you're not going to be open to receiving his or her help. "You have to be comfortable with your therapist and feel like you can confide in him or her," Gresham says.