

LAB RAT By DAVID GOODWILLIE



Is it time to confront your demons?

Everyone seems to be seeing a shrink these days.

What's the perfectly sane and well-adjusted guy to do? Give it a try

I ALMOST TURNED AROUND AND WALKED OUT. IT WAS THAT BAD. BEIGE WALLS, AMBIENT mood lighting, decorative bamboo shoots, and on the coffee table in front of me one of those miniature Zen rock gardens. There was also an incessant trickling. I peered into the gloom of the waiting room and saw its source: one of those plug-in waterfalls with a craggy slate cliff. There was no receptionist, so I took a seat. I picked up *Mother Jones* and put it down. I picked up the rock garden and started



What *was* I doing?

Therapy, psychoanalysis, counseling . . . call it what you will. I'd always called it a sham, a cop-out, an excuse. Granted, I don't come from a touchy-feely family. When I was a teen, my parents divorced, my mother moved in with a woman, my father remarried a widowed socialite, and my brother and I were shipped away to school. Yet none of us even considered therapy. Imagine that happening today, in this era of self-help books and life-coaching seminars. What's happened to America? When did we stop solving our own problems? We've all gone soft, and I wanted to find out why. So I booked a session with a shrink.

Okay, there's more to the story—a personal side. Truth be told, I was curious. As I'd crept through my late 20s and early 30s, the number of people I knew who were in therapy had grown to the point at which I found myself in the minority. And everyone talked about it! Dates came bustling into restaurants, apologizing because their shrinks had kept them late. Married friends mentioned how counseling had helped their sex lives so much, as if I wanted to know.

And it was not just a New York phenomenon. My therapy-devoted friends were in Atlanta and Los Angeles, in Kalamazoo and Fort Lauderdale. They were bankers and housewives and salesmen. They were older and younger. And most interesting of all? There was nothing wrong with them: no severe anxiety or debilitating depression, no strange phobias or suicidal tendencies. Sure, they had their issues—who doesn't?—but they were hardly head cases. Yet they looked forward to their weekly sessions the way I look forward to poker night. Therapy was their escape.

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IT WAS SIGMUND FREUD WHO, IN THE LATE 1800s, first theorized that psychological problems are rooted in the unconscious mind. The techniques he developed to bring those problems to the surface have, over 100-plus years of refinement, become the foundation of modern psychotherapy. But none of my therapy-attending friends ever mentioned

Psychotherapists don't cater just to women anymore: 38 percent of their patients today are men

the analysis of dreams or the cataloging of Oedipal impulses. No, it seemed they just spent their time ranting about scheming bosses or annoying spouses while their shrinks sat there quietly, feigning interest, fighting sleep. If things turned worse—if the sadness or anxiety became constant—perhaps the doctor would write a prescription or call another doctor. Therapeutic solutions and chemical cures. Life without mental illness—it's a powerful idea.

Popular, too. According to the National Center for Health Statistics, the number of American adults who visited mental-health professionals jumped by more than a third between 1997 and 2005, to almost 24 million. That's just over 10 percent of us. And the patients aren't all women: 38 percent of today's therapy seekers are men, presumably emboldened by James Gandolfini's Tony Soprano and Robert De Niro's Paul Vitti.

David Gardner, M.D., an associate clinical professor of psychology at Georgetown University hospital, traces the roots of the trend to the introduction of Prozac in 1986. "But drugs are only part of the story," he says. "Celebrities are the ones who erased the stigma attached to psychotherapy. Take Oprah. She talked openly on her show about her weight problems and history of sexual abuse, and ever since then there's been an explosion of self-revelation. It's really quite extraordinary."

SITTING IN THE WAITING ROOM, pondering the craziness of the "crazy" craze, I thought back to the night when this all started for me: at my 35th-birthday dinner. A group of friends began talking about how invaluable therapy had become in their lives, and when I raised a dissenting voice, I was quickly shouted down.

"How can you know what you're talking about if you've never tried it?" my friend Haley asked. The rest of the table jumped in. I was surrounded, outnumbered. And they had a point. A few days later, I called Haley to request her therapist's number and ask what the woman was like.

"She's laid back but tough," Haley said. "She doesn't just sit there and ask questions. It's more of a conversation."

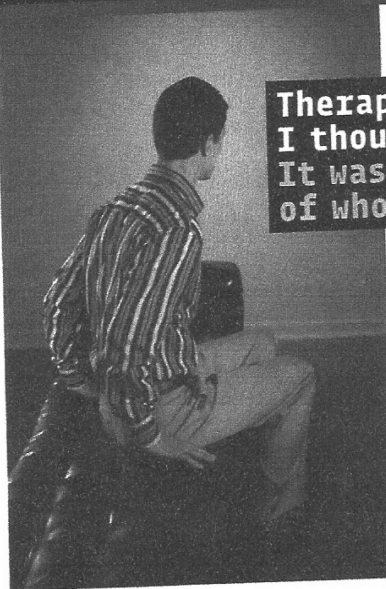
"About what?"

"About you."

"But I'm fine," I insisted.

"Oh, honey, no one's fine. That's the first thing you'll learn."

Those words stuck in my head. Was I really fine? Certainly there were things that bothered me—inconvenient corners of my life that I tended to ignore or explain away,



Therapy wasn't at all what I thought it would be. It was instead a reflection of who I was.

girlfriends, bad habits that never quite died. But the big picture still looked rosy. I lived in a great city, was surrounded by supportive friends, and now had something I could legitimately call a career. So why was I really sitting in this waiting room? It wasn't just because I was culturally curious. Or because of my friends. It was the birthday . . . 35. It felt like the end of something big. A graduation into adulthood.

But I wasn't an adult—not in any conventional sense. I wasn't married. I didn't have kids or a car. I owned no real estate. I didn't even have health insurance. And yet all of this seemed perfectly normal. I'd chosen a cer-

tain life and was now living it. A successful book, a film deal . . . what a great year it had been for me. So why hadn't I had fun? Why had my girlfriend and I broken up? Why did I run off to Europe for 2 months to get away from everything?

"David."

I looked up. She was smiling: a thin, stylish woman with wavy hair and a pleasantly disarming bohemian glow. I shook her hand and followed her to an airy office at the end of a long hallway. She pointed me toward the couch (yes, there really was a couch) and sat down in a chair facing me. I'd dreaded this moment. How do you confide in a complete stranger? How do you share the thoughts you've never shared with anyone else? Yes, this woman was trained (and paid) to listen. Yes, it was supposed to be easier to talk about your life with someone outside of it. But I didn't actually buy any of that. I mean, seriously. The entire setup was so artificial. How should I play along? Where would I begin?

Well, at the beginning, if you're Freud. First memories and all that. But so far, that had nothing to do with Freud. She hadn't asked me to lie down or recount dreams. N

Find the Right Therapy for You

Psychotherapy works—but only if you visit the right kind of therapist. Here are five common reasons men visit shrinks, and the recommended therapy for each problem.



DEPRESSION

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)

When men believe they have no reason to be happy, they turn away from activities they enjoy. "The cognitive part helps patients identify their negative thoughts, and the behavioral aspect pushes them to stay active," says Greg Simon, M.D., a psy-



PHOBIAS

Exposure Therapy

"Contact with the feared event is critical to overcoming it," says Jeffrey S. Berman, Ph.D., a University of Memphis professor. Exposure therapy slowly desensitizes you. Say you're afraid to fly. Over a few months, you visit an airport, sit on a plane, and taxi around. Then you're



SUBSTANCE ABUSE

12-Step Programs

Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous are still the key treatments for alcohol and drug abuse. A 2006 study in *Addiction* found that people who sought treatment by using a 12-step program were 44 percent more likely to be clean and sober 3 years later.



ANXIETY

Psychodynamic Therapy

CBT is the standard treatment for anxiety. But a recent study suggests that psychodynamic therapy, which raises awareness of unconscious motivations, is a great alternative. In the study, patients had a 153 percent greater reduction in symptoms after 12 weeks than those receiving relaxation training.

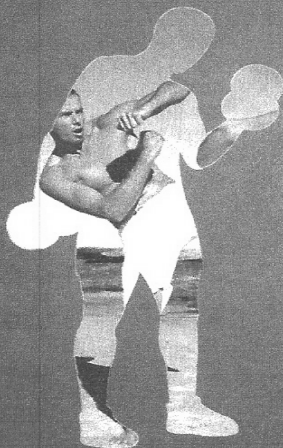


MARITAL TROUBLES

Family Therapy

"Family therapy treats relationships not individuals," says Jacques Barber, Ph.D., a professor of psych at the University of Pennsylvania. Its goal is not to point the cause problem—i.e., blame—but to reveal how the people's interaction feed it. HEATHER

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we just started talking. This and that. Occasionally, she asked a pointed question. Sometimes she wrote things down. On my book tour, I'd grown tired of talking about myself, so I created a kind of persona, a second, more public version of myself. It was a phenomenon I hadn't pondered or discussed with anyone because, well, that would be even more self-serving. And anyway, who in her right mind would listen?

It took me a moment to realize I was saying all of this out loud. In less than an hour, I'd delved deeper into my, what, *unconscious* than at any time in the past year. And this I told her, too.

"I'm not sure we've reached your unconscious yet," she said. "But we have awakened some of the bats that were sleeping."

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AT MY NEXT APPOINTMENT, I CAME RUSHING

in, frustrated by all the small aggravations of life. I slumped into a chair and took a deep breath, and the outside world began to fall away. I could no longer ignore it: I'd been looking forward to coming back. Last week's visit felt like something worth pursuing—an intriguing first date or an adulterous affair. And I was cheating on the part of me I didn't like. I just started talking: women, work, goals I should be pursuing—

"You're saying 'should' a lot," she said.

"I am?"

"Yes. As if you have a preconceived notion of yourself. Some other possible life you're battling against. Tell me, what do your parents do?"

"Is this the Freud part?"

She laughed. "Maybe, a little bit. We all have different versions of ourselves. And they're rooted in our pasts."

"They're both lawyers," I said.

"Oh, dear. This may take a while."

THERE IS A MOMENT IN THERAPY— if it's going well—when you decide to tell the truth. For me it was the middle of the fourth session. And I don't mean I'd been lying until then.

It's just that I hadn't come completely clean. This was, after all, a relationship of sorts. The person sitting across from me was someone I'd quickly come to value and respect. I wanted her to like me. I wanted her to be impressed. And yet I was playing that coy game we all play. When she said she was looking forward to reading my book, I told her she must have better things to do. The false modesty was pathetic. I'm sure she saw through it, even if she didn't let on.

She changed the subject. I changed it back.

"About the book," I said. "Of course I want you to read it."

"So why did you say you didn't?"

"I don't know. Why does anyone say anything?" And then I caught myself again. I did know. "Okay, I didn't want to sound self-involved."

She leaned forward slightly. "You're very hard on yourself. You should want your work to be read; otherwise, why do it? You can't just stay silent, hoping to be noticed. Not in this day and age."

I almost said that flagrant self-promotion was part of what had made "this day and age" so superficial in the first place. But this was psychotherapy, not philosophy. And I'd just made a small breakthrough of sorts, peeled away a layer of myself. She knew it, too.

Suddenly, we were off and running. She poked and prodded. I reacted and explained. For the first time, I could imagine these mini-realizations leading to a larger, life-altering discovery.

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THE FOLLOWING WEEK I CAME ARMED with a question.

"Tell me, where does all this end?"

"What do you mean?" she asked, looking up from her notes. She smoothed the wrinkles in her skirt.

"You don't like it when I ask the questions, do you?"

"Therapists have their own therapist for that," she said.

"Oh, that makes me feel better."

"How?"

"That you have someone to vent to."

"I think you know this is about a lot more than just venting," she said. "We're on a journey. And the end is never as important as how you get there."

"But if we keep peeling off layers, the may be nothing left."

She laughed at this and was silent for a time. I thought back to that first day the waiting room and of all those ideas and misconceptions. Psychotherapy was what I had thought it would be. It was instead a reflection of who I was. It was spiritual or New Age, because I'm not spiritual or New Age. But something positive was happening, so why not give it a chance? Was I going soft? Maybe a little or maybe I'd been hard-edged for too long.

I realized then that I was staring out the window. When I turned back, she was regarding me curiously, her brow slightly furrowed. And then, as if reaching a decision, she opened her notebook and clicked her pen.

"I think you're ready," she said. "So start at the beginning. What are your first memories?" ■