

Crossing the Threshold

What It Really Means to Begin Therapy

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There is a moment, for many people, that arrives before the first session. It is not the booking, not the calendar notification, not even the drive to the consulting room. It is the pause at the door, the breath before entering, the moment when you are about to step into something that you cannot entirely predict.

That moment is worth paying attention to. It tells us something important about what therapy actually is.

A doorway, not a destination

We often think about therapy in terms of outcomes: feeling better, understanding ourselves, managing anxiety, repairing relationships. These are real and worthwhile. But the image of a doorway points to something that destinations can miss.

A threshold is a boundary between two states. To cross it is to leave something behind and move towards something not yet known. Existentially, this is one of the more demanding things a person can do. It requires tolerating uncertainty, which is not a small ask.

When a new client sits down with me for the first time, I am often aware of how much has already happened for them before they arrived. The decision to seek help, particularly for the first time, is rarely casual. It tends to follow a period of struggling privately, of testing other solutions, of quietly wondering whether things might be different. The crossing has already begun long before the door opens.

What the threshold protects

In many traditions, a threshold is not simply a passageway. It marks a boundary that deserves respect. Something is held on either side of it.

In therapy, what tends to be held just inside the doorway is the self that has learned to manage, to present, to keep things together. That self has often served a person well. The defences we build are not failures of character; they are adaptations to circumstances. They helped us survive difficult relationships, environments, or experiences.

But adaptations that were once useful can, over time, become the very thing that prevents us from living more fully. The threshold is the place where a person begins to ask: what might become possible if I were willing to be a little less defended here?

It is relational from the start

One thing that can be easy to overlook when we imagine therapy is that it is not primarily a process of introspection. It is a relationship. The quality of that relationship is, according to decades of research, one of the most significant factors in whether therapy is helpful.

What this means in practice is that crossing the threshold involves not just an encounter with yourself, but an encounter with another person. The therapist brings their own presence into the room. What happens between the two people in that space is not incidental to the work; it is the work.

This can feel exposing. It is meant to, in the best possible sense. The relationship offers a context in which something that may never have been possible before becomes possible: being seen, fully and without judgement, and remaining safe.

The courage this takes

I want to name something that does not get said often enough: beginning therapy takes courage.

Not the performative kind, not the kind that announces itself. The quieter kind, that shows up in simply making an appointment and keeping it. That does not require you to know what you are doing or have a clear sense of what you want from it. It requires only a willingness to find out.

The doorway to another world is rarely marked. It does not look like a transformation. It looks like a Tuesday afternoon, sitting in a room with someone you have only just met, wondering what on earth you are supposed to say.

That is exactly where it begins.

John Walter is an integrative counsellor and psychotherapist in private practice in Bude, Cornwall, registered with the National Counselling and Psychotherapy Society. If you are considering whether therapy might be right for you, you are welcome to get in touch at johnwaltercounsellor.com.