



ESSAY

# Insight Is Not the Same as Change

*Understanding the pattern matters. But the work is not complete until insight becomes action.*

By Alexander Osterman, Licensed Professional Counselor

*A person does not become free by naming the cage alone.*

We are living in a strange and hopeful moment in mental health. For generations, people were embarrassed or ashamed to admit they were going to therapy. Since COVID, that seems to have changed. More people than ever have language for what they are experiencing.

Younger adults and adolescents now speak about anxiety, depression, trauma, attachment, boundaries, emotional regulation, family patterns, and unhealthy coping with a fluency that would have been rare a generation ago. For many people, going to therapy no longer means something is wrong with them. It means they are trying to understand themselves.

That is a good thing. It also brings a concern.

Understanding is a powerful starting place. I like when a client comes into therapy with some language for what he or she is struggling with and how it is affecting life. It gives us a direct point of contact for the work. But understanding cannot become the whole picture.

## The Bucket Has a Place

Some forms of therapy are excellent spaces for what I sometimes call dumping the bucket. A person comes in carrying the week: the stress, the resentment, the fear, the family issue, the relationship argument, the work pressure, the thing they almost said but swallowed, the thing they know they need to do but keep putting off.

They need somewhere to put it down. They need someone to listen. They need a room where the pressure can come down enough for them to breathe.

That kind of awareness can be life-changing. Being witnessed matters. Some people have spent years having their experience minimized, dismissed, mocked, or turned against them. Relief matters. Emotional expression matters.

But relief is not the same as change.

## **Awareness Can Become a Hiding Place**

A person can know he has anxiety and still let anxiety dictate the shape of his life. He can identify the wound and still organize his entire identity around protecting it. He can understand that an OCD ritual has no basis in reality and still follow through with the compulsion for brief relief at the cost of long-term ritual indulgence.

Self-reflection and insight are powerful starting tools. They cannot become the whole work. There is a point in therapy, self-reflection, or personal development where naming the problem is no longer enough. After the naming comes the harder question:

**Now what?**

**You have anxiety. Now what?**

**You know you avoid conflict. Now what?**

**You understand why you shut down. Now what?**

**You can explain the wound. Now what?**

**You can identify the defense. Now what?**

## **The Question Is Not Shame**

When I ask this question, it is not meant to shame anyone. It is not meant to minimize anxiety, trauma, depression, grief, or the old survival strategies that helped a person make it this far. Most patterns do not appear out of nowhere. People usually adapt for a reason.

They learn to avoid because something felt too overwhelming. They learn to please because conflict once felt dangerous, or because failure to please brought shame and criticism. They learn to detach because feeling everything at once was too much. Escapism brings relief for a reason.

The point is not to say the pattern was stupid. The point is to ask whether this is where the person stays for the rest of his life. If not, then we have to ask what needs to change so the pattern no longer rules him.

## Relief Without Reconstruction

This is why therapy that remains only bucket dumping can become incomplete. The client leaves lighter for a few days, then returns carrying the same bucket, filled by the same life and the same habits. The pressure gets released, but the structure of the life remains unchanged.

For example, a client may understand the destructive patterns connected to marijuana addiction: the way it saps drive, numbs ambition, and creates an escape that allows him to tolerate a stressful job while preventing him from doing what it takes to leave that job.

If therapy only becomes a place to discharge the stress, it may become part of the cycle of temporary relief without addressing the central issue. How do we help this person quit smoking, break the cycle, and reclaim agency?

How do we work together to help him become stronger, more grounded, more structured, and more capable so the cycle can actually be broken?

That work can be heavy. It can be daunting. But when change is possible, it is necessary.

## The Weight Has to Become Yours

There is a heaviness to confronting the issue and moving toward change.

If I carry the weight for you, I steal something from you.

If we only talk about the weight, we may understand it better while your life remains organized around it.

The deeper work is helping you become strong enough, honest enough, and structured enough that the weight no longer rules you.

Insight must become action. The person needs to understand why action is necessary, build a plan, transfer tools into daily life, and collect small wins so both confidence and capability are strengthened before the larger cage is broken.

A person does not become free by naming the cage alone. He becomes free by learning where the door is, reaching for it, and practicing the difficult act of walking through.

## The Gap My Work Lives In

That is the gap my work lives in.

Insight matters. It gives language to what was once only chaos, shame, dread, or confusion. It helps a person understand how he arrived where he is and how the problem is affecting his life.

But insight is not the same as change.

Change begins when we start to answer now what. When the wound you can explain no longer gets full authority over your choices. When you begin to build structure, collect small wins, and do what is necessary to break the old pattern.

The question is not simply, Do you understand why you are this way?

The deeper question is this: Now that you understand, what are you going to do?

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