What surprised me about going to therapy

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I'm not sure I ever really considered exactly what going to therapy might look like, but if I had, I would not have pictured a heart-pounding, snot-running, sweating mess of a woman sitting on a couch as her life unraveled before a perfect stranger.

For someone like me—a 30-year-old mother with no evidence of trauma, a skin color that grants me a lot of privilege, and no immediate problem paying my bills—I thought therapy seemed self-indulgent, like a trip to the spa or a relaxing facial. For someone like me, without a particular reason to go to therapy, seemed akin to something a "Real Housewife" might do, dropping a line about her therapy sesh in between hitting up a juice bar with friends. [*Editor's Note: I do love a good juice bar. Or just an* _SOS session_.]

Although I would never, ever begrudge anyone for seeking therapy, I've never understood why *I* might be a candidate for it. I mean, how narcissistic can I be to pay someone to listen to my first-world problems, right? I thought for sure unless something traumatic happened in my life —like going to war or losing a child or having some kind of tragedy—it would be most prudent to keep trudging along on my own.

Until the day I realized that spending hours locked in the bathroom at night picking at my skin is most definitely not healthy. At the age of 30, I finally took a good hard look at myself and admitted that I needed help. I wasn't sure how or where that help would come from, but I did a quick Google search and emailed a therapist that looked like she might be able to help.

So to therapy I went. I lied to my husband about going because I was too ashamed to admit the truth. People in our small, rural, mostly farming town don't "do" therapy. If you have time to feel sad, you're obviously just not working enough. (And yes, I realize the fact that I was ashamed to admit to my own spouse that I signed up for therapy is probably a big, glaring sign that I needed help.)

The point is, I went. And like that time I tried softball and was daydreaming in the field until a ball came flying along straight into my chest and I got the wind knocked out of me, leaving me lying face-up, gasping for breath, I was gobsmacked to realize that therapy is hard work.

I'm not sure why I thought therapy would be relaxing—like an hour-long session to just talk about all of the ways I'm stressed out—but after my first session, I realized that's exactly what I'd thought. Instead, beginning therapy meant coming face-to-face with all of the problems, insecurities, stressors, and triggers I've spent a lifetime trying to bury. It was daunting to sit on a couch, face a stranger and say, "Here's what I'm dealing with and I don't know what to do anymore."

As cliché as it may be, we all have issues from our past and unfortunately, not talking about

them or pretending they don't exist doesn't magically make them go away. It was as if therapy was a giant mirror forcing me to look at all of the ugly parts of my life I've spent so long trying not to see.

When it was time for my second therapy appointment, I spent the night before panicking, breaking out in a cold sweat and dreaming up 8,048 excuses I could give for canceling. (Flat tire? Broken car? Sick kids?)

During that second session, I don't think I've gone through that much tissue since my kids all caught the flu on the same day. After leaving the therapist's office, I felt like I had been hit by a car. (I actually have been hit by a car, so unfortunately, I do know what that feels like.) I had essentially opened myself up, looked at all of the yucky parts of my life—childhood issues, hatred for my body, a recent miscarriage, hiding behind work, valuing myself by accomplishments instead of self-love, my fears of motherhood, and my poor stress coping mechanisms—and been forced to face them. It's not fun to see yourself through another's eyes and realize that when you break down the pieces, you're not quite as "together" as you thought.

I am also incredibly glad I went. Just like exercise or that difficult task you put off for months until you finally give up and just do it, after it was over, I felt clear. Lighter, cleaned out, and emptied. I had paid a stranger to let me do a virtual dump of the baggage I had been carrying around for 30 years and it felt like the greatest relief to let it go.

I've not spent enough time in therapy to claim that it has completely transformed my life, but I have realized a few things, such as: 1) That chest pain I've been having? Yeah, that's not normal. Stress can cause very real physical symptoms, people, 2) Everyone—and I mean *everyone*—has shit to deal with, so none of us is "too good" for therapy and finally, 3) Therapy is intensely hard, overwhelming work.

But like most things in life, I am learning that putting in the hard work has its upsides and rewards. Sometimes, we need to put in the hard work to get to the good stuff. And that's nothing to be afraid of anymore.