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### **A Nonlinear Dynamical Systems Lens on Psychotherapy Process**

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# A Nonlinear Dynamical Systems Lens on Psychotherapy Process

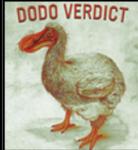
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## Introduction



### The Dodo Bird Verdict

All empirically validated psychotherapies produce equal outcomes!

Psychotherapy is perhaps the most tested health intervention of all time (Gelo & Salvatore, 2016). Research has shown: “It works!” However, the question of *why* therapy works remains unclear (Gelo & Salvatore, 2016). Nonlinear dynamical systems (NDS) theory focuses on complex interactions of multivariate systems unfolding in time. NDS allows us to look at **process over technique**. The targets of change in psychotherapy are themselves complex patterns of thought, behavior, emotion, and social relationships, each of which is interactive with the other and changing over time. Perhaps process research in psychotherapy has failed to find clear results because it has been too myopic in its design? This review examines, through an NDS lens, which common processes are most likely at work across different approaches in facilitating positive treatment outcomes.

## Flexibility

Flexibility is gained through an open therapeutic process, guided by empathy: commonly referred to as the “therapeutic alliance.” Specific techniques across approaches may also increase flexibility (Wampold & Norcross, 2018).

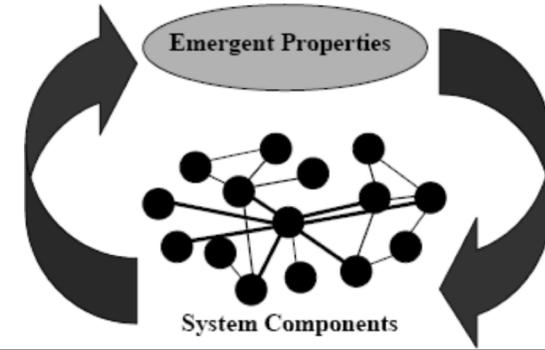
Ex: How can I deal with my anger?  
Flexibility uses a range of coping responses, flexible perspective-taking, and various emotions.

## Repair

Experience is a web of possible connections flowing over time, which can be altered and repaired when new insights and new habits are made - gradual change. Or, an entire network structure may break down and reorganize (e.g., “sudden gains;” Heinzel et al., 2014).

## Intentionality + Awareness = Mindfulness

Mindfulness involves the application of intention to attention. It is the space in which one may gain more flexible information within the flow of experience and apply greater intentionality to one’s choices under stress (Pincus, 2016). Meta-cognition and meta-emotion can increase awareness and intentionality on a secondary disturbance level (Johnson et al., 2018).



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