

What to expect from psychological therapy

What is psychological therapy?

The term 'psychological therapy' is used in this leaflet as a general term to cover a range of approaches from the related fields of psychology, psychotherapy, and counselling. In psychological therapy, a psychological therapist works together with a client to help them understand and overcome psychological difficulties. There are many kinds of psychological therapy (for example, cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), family therapy, and psychodynamic therapy). All of these work slightly differently, but what they share is that they are based on a relationship between a client and a therapist, and on bringing about change through talking, in a supportive environment.

The term 'therapist' in this leaflet refers to anyone doing psychological therapy. Therapists vary in terms of their professions, job titles, and training.

Your therapist will help you become aware of your mood, your behaviours, and your thoughts about yourself and others. Your therapist can help you improve your skills in managing difficult situations and making positive changes in your life.

The majority of psychological therapies are based on scientific research, and are 'evidence based' – meaning there is good evidence to show they work for a particular kind of problem. You can ask your therapist

- what kind of therapy they are suggesting for you
- what the evidence is that the therapy works for the difficulties you are having
- what the therapist's experience and training is in the therapy they are suggesting

You can expect your therapist to check with you that you are getting what you want from therapy. You can also expect that your therapist will know their own limits, and know if they need to refer you on to someone else.

What to expect in the first session

Your first psychological therapy session is usually a time for the therapist to gather information about you and your needs. The therapist may ask you to fill out forms about your current and past physical and emotional health. It might take a few sessions for your therapist to fully understand your situation and concerns and to determine the best approach or course of action.

The first session is also an opportunity for you to talk with your therapist to see if his or her approach and personality are going to work for you. Make sure you understand

- what type of therapy will be used
- the goals of your therapy
- the length of each session, how many therapy sessions you may need, and how often sessions will be

Don't hesitate to ask questions any time during your appointment. If you don't feel comfortable with the

therapist you are seeing, bring this up, and if necessary ask to see someone else. Having a good fit with your therapist is critical for therapy to be effective. Psychological therapy can be life-changing and positive, but it can also be hard work: you may need to think and talk about quite difficult things that you have kept private in the past. The best therapy strikes a balance between being supportive and gently challenging you to change your thinking and how you do things.

What to expect when therapy ends

Your therapist should talk with you in sessions about when and how therapy will end. They may ask you to fill out forms about your current emotional health and your experience of therapy – these help the therapist and the service find out how well they are doing their job. Positive and critical information is welcomed by therapists.

Boundaries

Every relationship has boundaries – things which are okay in the relationship, and things which are not. Boundaries include issues like how close it is okay to stand, what it is okay to talk about, when it is okay to meet, and so on. Relationships with therapists are no different.

Therapists all operate under laws and guidelines about boundaries. You can ask your therapist about these and they should tell you what these are. The list below shows some of the things you can expect from the relationship with your therapist.

- Your therapist should respect your sessions – not cancelling or changing them unnecessarily, not arriving late, and not interrupting sessions to take phone calls

- Your therapist should make sure that sessions focus on you and your needs
- Your therapist should listen to what you have to say and treat you with respect
- Your therapist should meet you in a safe, suitable environment (normally at their place of work, but some sessions may take place outside if this is helpful for the therapy)
- Your therapist should respect boundaries you set - such as things you do not wish to talk about, or how to contact you
- Your therapist should not enter into a different relationship with you – as a friend, business partner, or any kind of sexual relationship
- Physical contact with a therapist (like a hug or a touch) is rare. Your therapist should always respect your wishes about physical contact, and be able to explain how such contact is consistent with the therapy
- Your therapist should explain why they are proposing any kind of activity or area of therapy (for example, why they think it would be helpful to talk about your past, why they wish to contact you by telephone, or why they want you to do some homework)

Therapists normally keep written records of therapy sessions – this is partly to help them remember better, and partly because their professional guidelines require them to keep proper records about their activity. If you wish to see these records, you can ask your therapist. All written records should be stored safely and are kept confidential.

All therapists have a *supervisor* – a senior colleague that they meet with regularly to talk about their work, to help them do their job better. Therapists will bring up information about clients with their supervisor, but this information is also kept confidential between the therapist and supervisor. You can ask your therapist about their supervision arrangements, and if you want, your therapist can keep your identity private when they talk with their supervisor.

Often it is very helpful for therapists to share information with others – for example, if there are many people involved in your care, it is often helpful to make sure each of them knows important information. This sharing should be discussed with you, and if there is any information you do not want to be shared, you should be able to talk about this with your therapist and have your wishes recorded and respected whenever possible.

If you do not feel able to bring up your concerns with your therapist directly, or when you bring them up the difficulties are not sorted out to your satisfaction, you should take this further.

It is normally best to speak to the service that employs the therapist (the details of how to do this are below), but if that is not possible you can speak to the organization that professionally regulates the therapist. Your therapist should tell you who this is if you ask them. For medical doctors, this is the GMC, for nurses it is the NMC, and for many other professionals it is the HCPC (their contact details are also below).

Organization contact details: NAME OF THERAPIST SERVICE AND CONTACT NAME, TEL & EMAIL

Health and Social Care Professions Council (HCPC): www.hpc-uk.org 0800 328 4218

Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC): www.nmc.org.uk 020 7462 5800

General Medical Council (GMC): www.gmc-uk.org 0161 923 6602

If you are interested in further information about what therapy will be or should be like, speak to your therapist, or visit <http://supportingsafetherapy.org/>

Confidentiality and sharing information

Except in very special circumstances, things you talk about with your therapist are confidential – information will not be passed on to other people who are not involved in your care without your permission. The main exception is if your therapist learns about a risk of significant harm to you or another person: if this is the case, your therapist has a duty to pass on this information to the appropriate authorities.

What to do if you have concerns or questions

Psychological therapy can be a very positive, life-changing experience, but it is not an easy thing to take part in, and can be emotionally difficult or draining. If anything about your therapy sessions or your therapist's behaviour does not feel right or makes you feel uncomfortable, you can bring this up with your therapist if you feel able – often difficulties can be sorted out and therapy can then go ahead.

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