

Psychotherapy: What Is It, Who Does It, What Can It Do For Me?

By Jaelline Jaffe, Ph.D.

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, more than 30 million Americans need help dealing with feelings and problems that seem beyond their control – problems with a marriage or relationship, a family situation, or dealing with losing a job, the death of a loved one, depression, stress, burnout, or substance abuse. Those losses and stresses of daily living can at times be significantly debilitating. Sometimes we need outside help from a trained, licensed professional in order to work through these problems. Through therapy, psychologists help millions of Americans of all ages live healthier, more productive lives.

American Psychological Association website

What is psychotherapy?

Psychotherapy was originally known as “the talking cure,” although there are many modern therapies that include non-verbal approaches. The therapist and patient/client are partners in a collaborative process, talking through the issues in the person’s life, and generally working to change awareness, thoughts, feelings, and behaviors to improve the quality of the individual’s life and relationships.

There are many different “theoretical orientations” in psychotherapy. These varying approaches reflect different views about the nature of behavior and change. Some kinds of differences are seen in such aspects as whether the main focus is on:

- the past, present or future
- thoughts and actions, or feelings and emotions
- the mind, body, or spirit
- experiences or fantasies
- choices and consequences, or unconscious motivations
- the therapist as a “blank screen” on which the patient projects ideas, or the therapist as a whole person who interacts with the client
- long-term, frequent sessions to work on “depth” issues, or short-term treatment to deal with problem-solving and symptom-abatement
- internal issues, or interpersonal relationships
- personal insight or communication with others
- individuals, couples, families, or groups
- talking, or using art, music, dance, hypnosis, or other creative interventions
- using the person’s description of his/her inner experience or using electronic equipment to reflect inner experience

This is only to give some sense of the many variations in the way psychotherapy is conducted. Most forms of psychotherapy are not as “black and white” in their differences as the above list would imply, and many features will overlap in a particular therapist’s style.

Research has been conducted to determine which theoretical approach is “best” or “most effective,” with the same conclusion being reached in every study: what makes the

difference is the relationship—the rapport—between the therapist and the client. Generally, the most important factor in working with a therapist is to choose one with whom you feel safe, confident, and trusting, regardless of the specific approach or degrees. There are, of course, people in any profession who are opportunists, who can seem trustworthy but are unethical or even dangerous. That is one reason to **use a reliable referral source such as the Southern California Psychotherapy Referral Service to find a good therapist.**

Isn't it a weakness to ask a psychotherapist for help with my problems?

You go to a dentist to get help with your teeth, and to a cardiologist for help with your heart. Getting professional help for mental health problems is no different from getting help with physical problems—and, in fact, some mental health problems actually have a physical basis. Seeking assistance is a sign of intelligent consideration and recognition that you need another perspective and some different input to help make your own decisions about the direction of your life.

Some examples of reasons to go to a psychotherapist include:

- sadness and depression that hang over you, no matter what you do
- extreme worry or anxiety that interferes with your daily life
- behavior that has become harmful or dangerous to yourself or to others
- marital conflicts that involve hostility, extreme anger, violence, or distance in the relationship
- difficulties with children or adolescents
- behavior that seems out of control
- difficulty in adjusting to changes in family, life phase, work, health, or other circumstances
- desire to have better understanding of personal motivations and actions
- need for assistance in planning for retirement, career change, elder family members, or other life transitions

Who provides psychotherapy services?

The Southern California Psychotherapy Referral Service panel includes four different types of State licensed mental health professionals:

Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW)

- therapist trained to help people function in their environment, deal with their relationships with others, and solve personal and family problems
- about 40% of social workers practice psychotherapy
- others are case managers who coordinate a range of needed services for a client (psychiatric, medical, legal, or financial)
- has at least a Master's degree in social work (MSW), 3000 supervised clinical hours and passage of a licensing exam

Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist (MFT)

- psychotherapist who treats individuals, couples or families involved in interpersonal relationships

- licensed to diagnose and treat mental and emotional disorders within the context of marriage, couples and family systems, as well as assist individuals in achieving more satisfying personal and family life
- includes premarital counseling, child counseling, divorce or separation counseling and other relationship counseling (many MFTs work with same-gender as well as heterosexual couples, though some therapists have specializations with gay couples)
- has at least a Master's degree in psychology or marriage and family therapy, 3000 supervised clinical hours (including at least 500 hours with children, families, or couples), and passage of a licensing exam

Licensed Clinical Psychologist

- can do assessments to help evaluate people's mental health and treat problems using psychotherapy
- has training in both clinical and hospital settings
- might focus on particular populations (such as children, adolescents, older adults) or specific issues (such as mental disorders, careers, marital problems, or educational or neuropsychological assessment)
- has a doctoral degree in psychology (Ph.D. or Psy.D.), 3000 hours of supervised clinical experience in a hospital, clinic or other health care facility, and passage of a licensing exam

Psychiatrist

- a medical doctor who specializes in the diagnosis, treatment and prevention of mental illnesses and substance abuse disorders
- may specialize in such areas as child and adolescent psychiatry, geriatric psychiatric, forensic psychiatry, psychopharmacology, and/or psychoanalysis
- can prescribe medication (and often monitors medications for clients seen by other psychotherapists, rather than performing ongoing therapy)
- has a medical degree (M.D. or D.O.), completed 3-year psychiatric residency training, and passage of a licensing exam

In actuality, the differences in therapy practices are as much influenced by personality and individual training as by degree or license. Research indicates that it is not just the theoretical perspective or training that leads to the best outcomes, but the relationship you have with the therapist. The best therapist for you is probably one with whom you feel comfort, confidence, and trust, regardless of degree or license.

Sometimes people talk to more than one therapist on the phone or meet for a brief session with more than one before starting. **One benefit of working with our referral network is that when you explain your needs to the area coordinator, you will be given a referral that will help you avoid having to do that kind of "shopping" to find the right therapist for you.**

How can psychotherapy help me?

According to research studies as reported by the American Psychological Association:

- most people who receive psychotherapy are greatly improved when compared with those who have untreated mental health problems

- at least 50% of those seen for eight sessions show improvement
- at least 75% of those seen for six months show improvement
- because the mind and body are connected, both physical and mental symptoms can be decreased with psychotherapy
 - many physical complaints such as fatigue, abdominal distress, headaches, and backaches can be relieved when depression, stress, or anxiety are treated

A psychotherapist provides another perspective on your life, helping you see where you are making choices that you may not realize, offering alternatives, helping you practice different ways of interacting, sometimes setting your mind at ease by reassuring you that you are "normal." Therapy can help you improve the quality of your life in many ways, such as:

- decreasing stress, anxiety and depression
- improving relationships with family, friends, and in work settings
- dealing with trauma and losses
- learning better anger management, conflict resolution, and coping skills
- freeing yourself from self-destructive behaviors
- making difficult decisions
- assisting children, adolescents and elders in your family
- exploring your past and come to terms with the people and events that have shaped your life
- planning for your future

According to a recent study:

- In the past 2 years, 27% of the general adult population has either seen a mental health professional for therapy or taken a prescription medication for a personal, emotional, or mental health problem.
- One-quarter of those taking only medication have received a recommendation from a doctor that they receive talk therapy as well, but have not done so.
- 80% of those who have received treatment have found it effective.
- 85% report that they are satisfied with treatment, and more than half (54%) are either very or extremely satisfied.
- Almost half of those surveyed (49%) know someone who has been in treatment, and almost two thirds (61%) say they do not view the choice to receive therapy as a sign of character weakness.
- 40% of adults think that their parents would have benefited from therapy.
- 37 percent of those who report having experienced sufficient distress to warrant treatment have not received it.

Therapy in America 2004 poll, sponsored by Psychology Today and PacifiCare Behavioral Health, **The Therapist** (CAMFT, Sept/Oct 2004, p. 25)

Whether you *know* you need some help with an emotional issue, or wonder if psychotherapy might be able to help—or even if you are just interested in doing some self-exploration—contact a qualified mental health professional and take that big step toward improving the quality of your life and your relationships.

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