

Arts in Psychotherapy

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What is Psychotherapy?

A psychological professional can help you work through such problems. Through psychotherapy, psychological therapists help people of all ages live happier, healthier and more productive lives.

In psychotherapy, professionals apply scientifically validated procedures to help people develop healthier, more effective habits. There are several approaches to psychotherapy — including cognitive-behavioral, interpersonal and other kinds of talk therapy — that help individuals work through their problems.

Psychotherapy is a collaborative treatment based on the relationship between an individual and a professional. Grounded in dialogue, it provides a supportive environment that allows you to talk openly with someone who's objective, neutral and nonjudgmental. You and your psychological therapist will work together to identify and change the thought and behavior patterns that are keeping you from feeling your best.

By the time you're done, you will not only have solved the problem that brought you in, but you will have learned new skills so you can better cope with whatever challenges arise in the future.

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When should you consider psychotherapy?

Because of the many misconceptions about psychotherapy, you may be reluctant to try it out. Even if you know the realities instead of the myths, you may feel nervous about trying it yourself.

Overcoming that nervousness is worth it. That's because any time your quality of life isn't what you want it to be, psychotherapy can help.

Some people seek psychotherapy because they have felt depressed, anxious or angry for a long time. Others may want help for a chronic illness that is interfering with their emotional or physical well-being. Still others may have short-term problems they need help navigating. They may be going through a divorce, facing an empty nest, feeling overwhelmed by a new job or grieving a family member's death, for example.

Signs that you could benefit from therapy include:

- You feel an overwhelming, prolonged sense of helplessness and sadness.
- Your problems don't seem to get better despite your efforts and help from family and friends.
- You find it difficult to concentrate on work assignments or to carry out other everyday activities.
- You worry excessively, expect the worst or are constantly on edge.
- Your actions, such as drinking too much alcohol, using drugs or being aggressive, are harming you or others.

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What are the different kinds of Psychotherapy?

There are many different approaches to psychotherapy. Psychological therapists generally draw on one or more of these. Each theoretical perspective acts as a roadmap to help the professional understand their clients and their problems and develop solutions.

The kind of treatment you receive will depend on a variety of factors: current psychological research, your professional's theoretical orientation and what works best for your situation.

Your psychological therapist's theoretical perspective will affect what goes on in his or her working place. Professionals who use cognitive-behavioral therapy, for example, have a practical approach to treatment. Your therapist might ask you to tackle certain tasks designed to help you develop more effective coping skills. This approach often involves homework assignments. Your professional might ask you to gather more information, such as logging your reactions to a particular situation as they occur. Or your professional might want you to practice new skills between sessions, such as asking someone with an elevator phobia to practice pushing elevator buttons. You might also have reading assignments so you can learn more about a particular topic.

In contrast, psychoanalytic and humanistic approaches typically focus more on talking than doing. You might spend your sessions discussing your early experiences to help you and your psychologist better understand the root causes of your current problems.

Your psychotherapist may combine elements from several styles of psychotherapy. In fact, most therapists don't tie themselves to any one approach. Instead, they blend elements from different approaches and tailor their treatment according to each client's needs.

The main thing to know is whether your psychotherapist has expertise in the area you need help with and whether your psychotherapist feels he or she can help you.

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What should you ask yourself?

When you're ready to select a professional, think about the following points:

- Do you want to do psychotherapy by yourself, with your partner or spouse, or with your children?
- What are your main goals for psychotherapy?
- Will you use your health insurance or employee assistance program (EAP) to pay for psychotherapy?
- If you'll be paying out of pocket, how much can you afford?
- How far are you willing to drive?
- What days and times would be convenient?

What should you ask a professional?

Psychological professionals are often with clients and don't always answer their phones right away. Just leave a message with your name, phone number and brief description of your situation.

Once you connect, some questions you can ask a psychological professional are:

- Are you accepting new patients?
- Do you work with men, women, children, teens, couples or families?
- What are your areas of expertise?
- Do you have experience helping people with symptoms or problems like mine?
- What is your approach to treatment?
- What are your fees? Do you have a sliding-scale policy if I can't afford your regular fees? Do you accept credit cards or personal checks? Do you expect payment at the time of service?
- What are your policies concerning things like missed appointments?

You might want to work with a psychological professional who shares your religious views or cultural background, for example. While some professionals are more open to disclosing personal information than others, the response will give you important information about whether you'll work well together.

While you're assessing a psychological professional, he or she will also be assessing you. To ensure that psychotherapy is successful, the psychological professional must determine whether there's a good match when it comes to personality as well as professional expertise. If the psychological professional feels the fit isn't right — perhaps because you need someone with a different specialty area — he or she will refer you to another professional who can help.

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Making your first appointment

You may feel nervous about contacting a psychological professional. That anxiety is perfectly normal. But having the courage to overcome that anxiety and make a call is the first step in the process of empowering yourself to feel better. Just making a plan to call and sticking to it can bring a sense of relief and put you on a more positive path.

Psychological professionals understand how difficult it can be to make initial contact. The first call is something new for you, but it's something they handle regularly. Leave a message with your name, your contact number and why you are calling. It's enough to just say that you are interested in knowing more about psychotherapy. Once your call is returned, they'll lead a brief conversation to get a better sense of what you need, whether they are able to help and when you can make an appointment.

You might be tempted to take the first available appointment slot. Take a few minutes to stop and think before you do. If it does not fit with your schedule, you can ask if there are other times available that might fit better for you.

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What factors should you consider?

You'll need to think about the best time of day and week to see your psychological professional. Factors to consider include:

- Your best time of day. Whether you're a morning person or a night owl, know when you're at your best and schedule your appointment accordingly.
- Work. If you have to take time off from work, ask your human resources department if you can use sick leave for your psychotherapy sessions. You might also want to schedule your first appointment later in the day so you don't have to go back to work afterward. If you have an upsetting topic to discuss, you may be tired, emotionally spent, puffy-eyed or distracted after your first session.
- Family responsibilities. Unless your children are participating in treatment, it's usually not a good idea to bring them along. Choose a time when you will have child care available.
- Other commitments. A psychotherapy session typically lasts 45 to 50 minutes. Try to schedule your session at a time when you won't have to rush to your next appointment afterward. Worrying about being late to your next commitment will distract you from your psychotherapy session.

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How should I prepare for the appointment?

Once you've made an appointment, ask your psychological professional how you should prepare. A psychological professional might ask you to:

- Fill out some client paperwork for your psychological professional. Your psychological professional may also provide a packet of materials covering logistical issues, such as cancellation fees and confidentiality.
- You may also want to prepare a list of questions, such as the average treatment duration, the professional's feelings about medication or good books on your issue.
- Learn about therapy. If any of your friends have done psychotherapy, ask them what it was like. Or read up on the subject. If you've had psychotherapy before, think about what you liked and didn't like about your former psychological professional's approach.
- Keep an open mind. Even if you're skeptical about psychotherapy or are just going because someone told you to, be willing to give it a try. Be willing to be open and honest so you can take advantage of this opportunity to learn more about yourself.
- Make sure you know where you're going. Check the professional's website or do a map search for directions to the professional's office.

Going to your first appointment

What should I bring?

A typical psychotherapy session lasts 45 to 50 minutes. To make the most of your time, make a list of the points you want to cover in your first session and what you want to work on in psychotherapy. Be prepared to share information about what's bringing you to the professional. Even a vague idea of what you want to accomplish can help you and your psychological professional proceed efficiently and effectively.

If you've been referred by another professional, such as a physician or attorney, notes about why they did so can be helpful. If a teacher suggested that your child undergo psychotherapy, you might bring in report cards or notes from his or her teacher. Your psychological professional can also call these professionals for additional information if you give written permission. Records from previous psychotherapy or psychological testing can also help your new psychological professional get a better sense of you.

If you're on any medications, jot down which medications and what dosage so your psychological professional can have that information.

It can be difficult to remember everything that happens during a psychotherapy session. A notebook can help you capture your psychological professional's questions or suggestions and your own questions and ideas. Jotting a few things down during your session can help you stay engaged in the process.

Most people have more than a single session of psychotherapy. Bring your calendar so you can schedule your next appointment before you leave your professional's office.

You'll also need to bring some form of payment. If you'll be paying for psychotherapy out of pocket, bring along a credit card, checkbook or cash.

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What should I expect?

For your first session, your psychological professional may ask you to come in to fill out paperwork if you haven't already done so.

Don't worry that you won't know what to do once the session actually begins. It's normal to feel a little anxious in the first few sessions. Psychological professionals have experience setting the tone and getting things started. They are trained to guide each session in effective ways to help you get closer to your goals. In fact, the first session might seem like a game of 20 questions.

Sitting face to face with you, your professional could start off by acknowledging the courage it takes to start psychotherapy. Then the psychological professional may ask a question like, "What brought you here today?" or "What made you decide to come in now rather than a month or a year ago?" It helps to identify your problem, even if you're not sure why you have it or how to handle it. For example, you might feel angry or sad without knowing what's causing your feelings or how to stop feeling that way. If the problem is too painful to talk about, the psychological professional shouldn't push you to say more than you're comfortable sharing until you get to know each other better. It's OK for you to say that you are not ready to talk about something just yet. You can request to have a break when you are too emotional to talk about your issues.

Your psychological professional also wants to know about your own and your family's history of psychological problems such as depression, anxiety or similar issues. You'll also explore how your problem is affecting your everyday life. Your psychological professional will ask questions like whether you've noticed any changes in your sleeping habits, appetite or other behaviors. A professional will also want to know what kind of social support you have, so he or she will also ask about your family, friends and coworkers.

It's important not to rush this process, which may take more than one session, or even longer session. While guiding you through the process, your psychological professional will let you set the pace when it comes to telling your story. As you gain trust in your psychological professional and the process, you may be willing to share things you didn't feel comfortable answering at first.

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Once your psychological professional has a full history, the two of you will work together to create a treatment plan. This collaborative goal-setting is important, because both of you need to be invested in achieving your goals. Your psychological professional may write down the goals and read them back to you, so you're both clear about what you'll be working on. Some professionals even create a treatment contract that lays out the purpose of treatment, its expected duration and goals, with both the individual's and psychological professional's responsibilities outlined.

At the end of your first session, the professional may also have suggestions for immediate action. If you're depressed, for example, the psychological professional might suggest seeing a physician to rule out any underlying medical conditions, such as a thyroid disorder. If you have chronic pain, you may need physical therapy, medication and help for insomnia as well as psychotherapy.

By the end of the first few sessions, you should have a new understanding of your problem, a game plan and a new sense of hope.

Undergoing Psychotherapy

Psychotherapy is often referred to as talk therapy, and that's what you'll be doing as your treatment continues. You and your psychological professional will engage in a dialogue about your problems and how to fix them.

What should I expect as I continue psychotherapy?

As your psychotherapy goes on, you'll continue the process of building a trusting, therapeutic relationship with your psychological professional.

As part of the ongoing getting-to-know-you process, your professional has to do some assessments including risk assessment. Psychological professionals are trained to administer and interpret tests that can help to determine the depth of your mental illness, anxiety, depression, identify important personality characteristics, uncover unhealthy coping strategies such as drinking problems, or identify learning disabilities. If parents have brought in a bright child who's nonetheless struggling academically, for example, a psychological professional will assess whether the child has attention problems or an undetected learning disability. Test results can help your psychological professional diagnose a condition or provide more information about the way you think, feel and behave.

You and your psychological professional will also keep exploring your problems through talking. For some people, just being able to talk freely about a problem brings relief. In the early stages, your professional will help you clarify what's troubling you. You'll then move into a problem-solving phase, working together to find alternative ways of thinking, behaving and managing your feelings. You might role-play new behaviors during your sessions and do homework to practice new skills in between. As you go along, you and your professional will assess your progress and determine whether your original goals need to be reformulated or expanded. In some cases, your psychological professional may suggest involving others. If you're having relationship problems, for instance, having a spouse or partner join you in a session can be very helpful. Similarly, an individual having parenting problems might want to bring his or her child in. And someone who has trouble interacting with others may benefit from group psychotherapy.

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As you begin to resolve the problem that brought you to psychotherapy, you'll also be learning new skills that will help you see yourself and the world differently. You'll learn how to distinguish between situations you can change and those you can't and how to focus on improving the things within your control.

You'll also learn resilience, which will help you better cope with future challenges. A 2006 study of treatment for depression and anxiety, for example, found that the cognitive and behavioral approaches used in psychotherapy have an enduring effect that reduces the risk of symptoms returning even after treatment ends. Another study found a similar result when evaluating the long-term effects of psychodynamic psychotherapy.

Soon you'll have a new perspective and new ways of thinking and behaving.

How can I make the most of psychotherapy?

Psychotherapy is different from medical or dental treatments, where patients typically sit passively while professionals work on them and tell them their diagnosis and treatment plans. Psychotherapy isn't about a psychological professional telling you what to do. It's an active collaboration between you and the professional.

In fact, hundreds of studies have found that a very important part of what makes psychotherapy work is the collaborative relationship between psychological professional and patient, also known as a therapeutic alliance. The therapeutic alliance is what happens when the professional and patient work together to achieve the patient's goals.

So be an active, engaged participant in psychotherapy. Help set goals for treatment. Work with your professional to come up with a timeline. Ask questions about your treatment plan. If you don't think a session went well, share that feedback and have a dialogue so that the professional can respond and tailor your treatment more effectively. Ask your psychological professional for suggestions about books or websites with useful information about your problems.

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And because behavior change is difficult, practice is also key. It's easy to fall back into old patterns of thought and behavior, so stay mindful between sessions. Notice how you're reacting to things and take what you learn in sessions with your psychological professional and apply it to real-life situations. When you bring what you've learned between sessions back to your professional, that information can inform what happens in his or her office to further help you. Through regular practice, you'll consolidate the gains you've made, get through psychotherapy quicker and maintain your progress after you're done.

Should I worry about confidentiality?

Psychological professionals consider maintaining your privacy extremely important. It is a part of their professional code of ethics. More importantly, it is a condition of their professional license. Psychological professionals who violate patient confidentiality risk losing their ability to practice in the future.

To make your psychotherapy as effective as possible, you need to be open and honest about your most private thoughts and behaviors. That can be nerve-wracking, but you don't have to worry about your psychological professional sharing your secrets with anyone except in the most extreme situations. If you reveal that you plan to hurt yourself or others, for example, your psychological professional is duty-bound to report that to authorities for your own protection and the safety of others. Psychological professional must also report abuse, exploitation or neglect of children, the elderly or people with disabilities. Your psychological professional may also have to provide some information in court cases.

Of course, you can always give your psychological professional written permission to share all or part of your discussions with your physician, teachers or anyone else if you desire.

Psychological professionals take confidentiality so seriously that they may not even acknowledge that they know you if they bump into you at the supermarket or anywhere else. And it's OK for you to not say hello either. Your psychological professional won't feel bad; he or she will understand that you're protecting your privacy.

Understanding Medication

In our quick-fix culture, people often hope a pill will offer fast relief from such problems as depression or anxiety. And primary care physicians or nurse practitioners — most people's first contact when they have a psychological problem — are typically trained to prescribe medication. They don't have the extensive training or the time to provide psychotherapy.

Is medication effective?

There are some psychological conditions, such as severe depression, bipolar disorder or schizophrenia, where medication is clearly warranted. But many other cases are less clear-cut.

Evidence suggests that in many cases, medication doesn't always work. In a 2010 study in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, for instance, researchers reviewed previous research on the effectiveness of antidepressants. They found that antidepressants did help people with severe cases of depression. For mild to moderate depression, however, the medication wasn't any more effective than a placebo.

What's more, medications don't help you develop the skills you need to deal with life's problems. Once you stop taking medication, your problems often remain or come back. In contrast, psychotherapy will teach you new problem-solving strategies that will also help you cope with future problems.

Do I need medication?

If you can function relatively well — meaning you can function well at work or school and have healthy relationships with family and friends — the answer is probably no.

Psychotherapy alone can be very effective. Or you might just need a more balanced lifestyle — one that combines work, exercise and social interactions.

Medication can be useful in some situations, however. Sometimes, people need medication to get to a point where they're able to engage in psychotherapy. Medication can also help those with serious mental health disorders. For some conditions, combining psychotherapy and medication works best.

Accessing Psychotherapy's Effectiveness

Some people wonder why they can't just talk about their problems with family members or friends. Psychological professionals offer more than someplace to vent. Psychological professionals have years of training and experience that help people improve their lives. And there is significant evidence showing that psychotherapy is a very effective treatment.

How effective is psychotherapy?

Hundreds of studies have found that psychotherapy helps people make positive changes in their lives.

Reviews of these studies show that about 75 percent of people who enter psychotherapy show some benefit. Other reviews have found that the average person who engages in psychotherapy is better off by the end of treatment than 80 percent of those who don't receive treatment at all.

How does psychotherapy work?

Successful treatment is the result of three factors working together:

- Evidence-based treatment that is appropriate for your problem.
- The psychological professional's clinical expertise.
- Your characteristics, values, culture and preferences.

When people begin psychotherapy, they often feel that their distress is never going to end. Psychotherapy helps people understand that they can do something to improve their situation. That leads to changes that enhance healthy behavior, whether it's improving relationships, expressing emotions better, doing better at work or school, or thinking more positively.

While some issues and problems respond best to a particular style of therapy, what remains critical and important is the therapeutic alliance and relationship with your psychological professional.

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What if psychotherapy doesn't seem to be working?

When you began psychotherapy, your psychological professional probably worked with you to develop goals and a rough timeline for treatment. As you go along, you should be asking yourself whether the professional seems to understand you, whether the treatment plan makes sense and whether you feel like you're making progress.

Some people begin to feel better in about 8 - 12 sessions. If you don't start seeing signs of progress, discuss it with your professional. Your professional may initiate a conversation about what to do. If he or she doesn't, bring it up yourself. You could ask your psychological professional about additional or alternative treatment methods, for example. Sometimes speaking up to your professional can be very empowering, especially since your psychological professional will be understanding and nonjudgmental instead of offended.

Keep in mind that as psychotherapy progresses, you may feel overwhelmed. You may feel more angry, sad or confused than you did at the beginning of the process. That doesn't mean psychotherapy isn't working. Instead, it can be a sign that your psychological professional is pushing you to confront difficult truths or do the hard work of making changes. In such cases, these strong emotions are a sign of growth rather than evidence of a standstill. Remember, sometimes things may feel worse before they get better.

In some cases, of course, the relationship between a patient and the psychological professional isn't as good as it should be. The professional should be willing to address those kinds of issues, too. If you're worried about your professional's diagnosis of your problems, it might be helpful to get a second opinion from another professional, as long as you let your original psychological professional know you're doing so.

If the situation doesn't improve, you and your professional may decide it's time for you to start working with a new one. Don't take it personally. It's not you; it's just a bad fit. And because the therapeutic alliance is so crucial to the effectiveness of psychotherapy, you need a good fit. If you do decide to move on, don't just stop coming to your first professional. Instead, tell him or her that you're leaving and why you're doing so. A good psychological professional will refer you to someone else, wish you luck and urge you not to give up on psychotherapy just because your first attempt didn't go well. Tell your next professional what didn't work to help ensure a better fit.

Knowing when you are done

You might think that undergoing psychotherapy means committing to years of weekly treatment. Not so.

How long should psychotherapy take?

How long psychotherapy takes depends on several factors: the type of problem or disorder, the patient's characteristics and history, the patient's goals, what's going on in the patient's life outside psychotherapy and how fast the patient is able to make progress.

Some people feel relief after only a single session of psychotherapy. Meeting with a qualified psychological professional can give a new perspective, help them see situations differently and offer relief from pain. Most people find some benefit after a few sessions, especially if they're working on a single, well-defined problem and didn't wait too long before seeking help.

If you've been suffering from extreme anxiety, for example, you might feel better simply because you're taking action — a sign of hope that things will change. Your professional might also offer a fresh perspective early in your treatment that gives you a new understanding of your problem. And even if your problem doesn't go away after a few sessions, you may feel confident that you're already making progress and learning new coping skills that will serve you well in the future.

Other people and situations take longer — maybe a year or two — to benefit from psychotherapy. They may have experienced serious traumas, have multiple problems or just be unclear about what's making them unhappy. It's important to stick with psychotherapy long enough to give it a chance to work. People with serious mental illness, suicidal thoughts, self-harm or other significant life changes may need ongoing psychotherapy. Regular sessions can provide the support they need to maintain their day-to-day functioning. Others continue psychotherapy even after they solve the problems that brought them there initially. That's because they continue to experience new insights, improved well-being and better functioning.

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How do I know when I'm ready to stop?

Psychotherapy isn't a lifetime commitment. In one classic study, half of psychotherapy patients improved after eight sessions. And 75 percent improved after six months and 80 percent improved with serious mental problems.

You and your psychological professional will decide together when you are ready to end psychotherapy. One day, you'll realize you're no longer going to bed and waking up worrying about the problem that brought you to psychotherapy. Or you will get positive feedback from others. For a child who was having trouble in school, a teacher might report that the child is no longer disruptive and is making progress both academically and socially. Together you and your professional will assess whether you've achieved the goals you established at the beginning of the process.

What happens after psychotherapy ends?

You probably visit your physician for periodic check-ups. You can do the same with your psychological professional.

You might want to meet with your psychological professional again a couple of weeks or a month after psychotherapy ends just to report how you're doing. If all is well, you can wrap things up at that follow-up session.

And don't think of psychotherapy as having a beginning, middle and end. You can solve one problem, then face a new situation in your life and feel the skills you learned during your last course of treatment need a little tweaking. Just contact your psychological professional again. After all, he or she already knows your story.

Of course, you don't have to wait for a crisis to see your psychological professional again. You might just need a "booster" session to reinforce what you learned last time. Think of it as a mental health tune-up.