



Patient education: Psychotherapy (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

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What is psychotherapy?

This means meeting with a counselor to talk about your feelings, relationships, worries, and behaviors. It is sometimes called "talk therapy."

How does psychotherapy work?

You meet with a therapist. This is a person with training in mental health care. It could be a psychiatrist, psychologist, counselor, doctor, nurse, social worker, or other health professional. They will talk to you about your situation. They will also help you learn ways to cope.

Most of the time, therapy sessions are done in person. But sometimes, they can happen online or by phone. How often you go, and for how long, depends on your situation.

Why might I get psychotherapy?

Psychotherapy can be used to treat different mental health conditions. Examples include:

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Post-traumatic stress disorder ("PTSD")
- Panic disorder
- Personality disorders
- Eating disorders
- Substance use disorders
- Obsessive-compulsive disorder ("OCD")
- Insomnia

In many cases, psychotherapy is used along with medicines as part of a treatment plan.

Psychotherapy can also help in other situations. For example, it can help you:

- Reach a goal, like quitting smoking or losing weight
 - Learn to manage a health condition
 - Cope with a crisis or life change
 - Improve personal relationships
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Are there different types of psychotherapy?

Yes. There are many different types. Some have different names but are similar to each other.

Types of psychotherapy include:

- Cognitive-behavioral therapy ("CBT") – You work to change how you think about your situation and what you do about it. CBT can help you learn about your patterns of thinking and how you react to things. It also teaches you healthy ways to cope.
- Psychodynamic therapy – You work on finding reasons for the way you do things. The therapist can help you see patterns in how you react to situations based on your experiences. Then, you can work to change these patterns.
- Interpersonal psychotherapy – This involves thinking about how you interact with other people. The goal is to help improve your relationships. This can be helpful for people with some mental health conditions.
- Motivational interviewing – This is a way to help you learn to change unhealthy behaviors. It can help you think about what you want to do differently and how to make these changes.
- Dialectical behavior therapy ("DBT") – This can help some people who have trouble controlling their emotions. It involves learning skills to help with this.
- Supportive psychotherapy – This generally means support to help you cope with a health problem, crisis, or other challenge. It involves learning about your thoughts and behaviors and developing healthy coping skills.

There are other types, too. Many therapists use a combination of approaches. The right type for you depends on your situation.

What happens during psychotherapy?

Psychotherapy can happen in different places. For example, this might be a doctor's office, hospital, or mental health clinic or practice. In some situations, you might meet with a therapist remotely (online).

There are different formats for psychotherapy. They include:

- Individual – You meet 1-on-1 with the therapist.
- Couple's therapy or marriage therapy – You and your partner see a therapist together. This can help you work to improve problems or challenges in your relationship.
- Family – Some or all your family members go to therapy with you. The focus is on improving communication and helping the whole family learn ways to cope. This can be done even if only 1 family member has a mental health condition.
- Group – This is a way to connect with other people who might be going through similar challenges. Different therapy techniques can be used during group sessions. Group therapy is often helpful for people dealing with things like grief, substance use disorder, or chronic health problems.

Between sessions, your therapist might ask you to do things on your own. For example, they might ask you to think about certain things, write down your feelings or behaviors, or practice certain coping skills.

How do I find a therapist?

You can start by talking to your regular doctor or nurse. They can recommend a therapist or practice based on your situation.

It's very important to find a therapist you trust and can build a relationship with. If you do not feel comfortable talking honestly with your therapist, you can look for a different one.

What else should I know?

- Try to take an active role in your therapy sessions. It can be hard to talk about your feelings and experiences. But it's important to be open and honest so your therapist can help you.
- It can take time for psychotherapy to work. Your therapist will work with you to set goals and talk about your progress regularly.

- If your doctor prescribed medicine to treat a mental health condition, follow all instructions for taking it. This is important even if you start to feel better. Many conditions are treated with both medicines and therapy.
 - If you are ever thinking of hurting or killing yourself, get help **right away**. You can:
 - Call your therapist or doctor, and tell them it is an emergency.
 - Call for an ambulance (in the US and Canada, call 9-1-1), or go to the emergency department.
 - Call or text **988** (in the US) to reach the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline.
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