

# How Therapy Can Help

## Overview

Myths and realities about how psychotherapy works.

- Myth: Only people with very serious problems need therapy.
- Myth: There's a stigma attached to getting counseling.
- Myth: You have to lie down on a couch and talk about things that happened long ago.
- Myth: Most therapists are crazy themselves.
- Myth: Talking about personal concerns with a stranger is uncomfortable.
- Myth: Therapy costs too much.
- Myth: It takes too long to make progress in counseling.
- Therapy doesn't have practical benefits.

Psychotherapy -- often called “talk therapy” -- can help you cope with many everyday concerns. It can help you improve your relationships; address your parenting concerns; manage your stress, emotions, anxiety, and negative thinking; and even increase your productivity at work. Hundreds of studies have shown that most people who receive therapy benefit from it.

But there are many myths and misconceptions about psychotherapy, a form of treatment that may involve counseling, medication, or both. You may feel that your problems aren't serious enough to require therapy, or that there is a stigma attached to getting help. You may have seen unflattering images of therapists in the media and think you wouldn't feel comfortable talking with them. Or, you may feel therapy would cost too much to be worthwhile.

Many beliefs about psychotherapy are based on outdated ideas that are no longer true for most people. Here are some myths and realities, along with up-to-date information about how psychotherapy can help.

### **Myth: Only people with very serious problems need therapy.**

*Reality: Most people who get counseling say they have benefited from it, no matter how serious their problems are.*

Psychotherapy *can* help with many serious and long-lasting mental illnesses. But it can also ease mild or short-term concerns about a specific situation, such as sadness about the loss of a friend or relative, difficulties in a relationship, or worries about money or work. Research has shown that more than two-thirds of the people who receive psychotherapy say that they benefited from it, regardless of the nature of their concern. Sometimes it helps just to talk about a problem with a trained professional who can give you a fresh perspective on it.

### **Myth: There's a stigma attached to getting counseling.**

*Reality: Seeing a psychotherapist about a psychological or emotional concern is equivalent to seeing a doctor about your physical health.*

More than 1 in 10 adults use mental-health services in an average year, the Surgeon General has found. Psychotherapy has become so widely accepted that it no longer carries a stigma or negative consequences for people who seek help.

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In fact, people may face negative consequences if they *don't* seek help, because their difficulties may affect their jobs, relationships, or other areas of life. Just as there's no reason to feel ashamed of seeing a doctor about your physical health, likewise there's no reason to feel embarrassed about talking with a therapist about an emotional concern.

### **Myth: You have to lie down on a couch and talk about things that happened long ago.**

*Reality: Most people sit in a chair and talk about their current concerns.*

Psychotherapy typically involves meeting with a therapist once a week or every other week for 45 to 50 minutes. You and your therapist sit facing each other in a chair in the therapist's office.

Until recently, therapy almost always involved talking in depth about childhood and other early experiences and their ongoing effects. But more and more psychotherapists are focusing on helping people identify and find solutions to current concerns. This is especially true of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), a popular form of therapy that helps people recognize and change ineffective ways of thinking. CBT deals with what's happening in the present. Many people benefit from CBT or other types of therapy in just a few sessions.

Some people receive group therapy instead of or in addition to individual counseling. Group therapy involves talking with other adults in the presence of a therapist who guides the discussions. This type of therapy may help if you have trouble with relationships, because the group can give you feedback on how you interact with others. If your concerns involve a partner or children, you may want to consider marriage (or "couples") counseling or family therapy.

### **Myth: Most therapists are crazy themselves.**

*Reality: Reputable therapists must meet standards set both by their profession and by the laws of their state.*

Psychotherapists may be psychiatrists (medical doctors who can prescribe medications) or other professionals, such as psychologists, social workers, or psychiatric nurses. In order to provide psychotherapy, they must be licensed by their state and meet other standards set by their professions. Choosing a licensed professional doesn't guarantee that a therapist will be right for you, but it does ensure that the person has met certain standards. You can take additional steps to find high-quality care by getting referrals from people you trust, such as doctors, clergy members, and friends.

Many studies have shown that the key to gaining the benefits of therapy is finding a therapist you feel comfortable with and trust. So it's a good idea to meet with several before choosing one. Contact the program that provided this

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publication for help in finding a therapist, or ask your family doctor for a referral. Or use the therapist-locator services on the Web sites for the American Psychological Association ([www.apa.org](http://www.apa.org)), the American Psychiatric Association ([www.healthyminds.org](http://www.healthyminds.org)), the National Association of Social Workers ([www.helpstartshere.org](http://www.helpstartshere.org)), or the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy ([www.aamft.org](http://www.aamft.org)).

#### **Myth: Talking about personal concerns with a stranger is uncomfortable.**

*Reality: Talking about some issues with a therapist can be easier than talking about them with people you know well.*

Psychotherapists are neutral observers who don't make judgments about whether your thoughts, feelings and actions are "right" or "wrong." If you're keeping feelings bottled up because you feel guilty or upset about them, you may find it a relief to talk with a therapist who provides a safe place to explore your concerns.

Therapists also keep what you say confidential unless they believe you are in danger of hurting yourself or others. In therapy you can talk about your concerns without worrying that someone will repeat, distort, or gossip about them, or that someone else will feel hurt if you tell the truth. So you might feel more comfortable talking with a therapist about some issues -- such as marital problems or worries about money -- than with a close friend.

Just remember that if a health plan pays for your counseling, your insurer will have the right to receive brief reports on your progress. If you are concerned about this, call your insurer to find out what information they require. To avoid this, some people pay out-of-pocket for their therapy.

#### **Myth: Therapy costs too much.**

*Reality: There are usually ways to afford therapy if you need it.*

Most group health plans cover part of the cost of therapy -- typically, about 50 to 80 percent -- and the Mental Health Parity and Addiction Equity Act of 2008 guarantees certain benefits. That federal law requires that starting in 2010, health plans for companies with 51 or more employees must set the same limits for mental-health coverage as for other types of medical treatment, so deductibles, co-pays, and other fixed costs will be the same.

Many therapists offer sliding-fee scales for people who can't pay the portion of costs required by their health plan or who don't have a plan. And community health services offer counseling at a greatly reduced cost to people who qualify. The Web site for Mental Health America ([www.mentalhealthamerica.net](http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net)) can help you find low-cost mental health services in your community.

**Myth: It takes too long to make progress in counseling.**

*Reality: Many people feel better after just a few meetings with a therapist.*

You may feel better after just one or two sessions with a therapist. It might be a relief just to “get something off your chest” or to talk about your concerns with someone who won’t blame you for them. Or your therapist might make a practical suggestion that would help you cope with a troubling concern.

Most people receive benefits from therapy in a relatively short time. “Many people complete psychotherapy in a few months or less,” the American Psychiatric Association says, especially when they receive counseling about a specific behavior. In general, the more serious the problem, the longer people need to remain in therapy. Therapists often prescribe short-term therapy (16 or fewer sessions) for a specific concern.

**Myth: Therapy doesn’t have practical benefits.**

*Reality: Psychotherapy can do more than just make you feel better.*

Psychotherapy can have many emotional benefits, such as improving your overall feeling of well-being and your ability to cope with everyday stress. But it can also have practical benefits. Research has found that people who receive counseling make fewer visits to doctors’ offices for illnesses that involve psychological distress. They take fewer sick days and have more job stability. At the same time, people who *don’t* seek help may suffer needlessly. They may lose jobs or relationships, develop substance abuse problems, undergo unnecessary medical procedures, and feel overwhelmed by emotions or responsibilities.

Whatever the nature of your concerns, you may get both emotional and practical benefits from talking about them with a therapist you feel comfortable with and trust. But many people don’t seek the benefits of therapy because they have outdated ideas about what counseling involves, how much it costs, or how long it takes. Having accurate information will help you decide whether psychotherapy might be right for you and, if so, what kind would be best.

The program that provided this publication has additional resources on psychotherapy and other forms of counseling that may be helpful.

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