

What is counselling and psychotherapy?

by Pauline O'Driscoll

Introduction

The aim of this information sheet is to explain what counselling and psychotherapy are and what you can expect in terms of the difference between talking to a therapist and a family member or friend. In this Information Sheet, we use 'therapy' to include 'counselling' and 'psychotherapy', and 'therapist' to include 'counsellor' and 'psychotherapist'.

There are a number of therapy approaches and professionally trained therapists to choose from. These will be briefly explained, with resources for further information.

It is important to consider carefully your expectations of therapy and of your therapist. This sheet provides information to help you to decide which type of therapy would be helpful, and also what you would look for in therapy so that you can feel at ease to discuss your personal and emotional issues.

Why people choose to have therapy

Usually individuals choose to have therapy because they are experiencing difficulties and distress in their lives. Sometimes people can be isolated but at other times, even where an individual has the most supportive family and friends, they can find it difficult if not impossible to explain why, for example, they may be feeling anxious and or depressed. Or it may be easier to talk about personal, family, or relationship issues with a person who is independent of friends and family. Other life issues and events which can be very difficult to deal with include bereavement, divorce, redundancy, health issues, bullying and so on.

However, you do not have to be in crisis or on the verge of one, before choosing to have therapy. You may be experiencing underlying feelings of dissatisfaction with

life in general, or be seeking balance in your life and spirituality. All of these reasons and more will bring individuals to therapy.

What is therapy?

Therapy is time set aside by you and the therapist to look at what has brought you to therapy. This might include talking about life events, (past and present), feelings, emotions, relationships, ways of thinking and patterns of behaviour. The therapist will do their best to help you to look at your issues, and to identify the right course of action for you, either to help you resolve your difficulties or help you find ways of coping. Talking about these things may take time, and will not necessarily all be included in one session.

The number of sessions offered may be limited, and so it is best to ask about this in advance, for example, brief therapy or short term therapy might provide a maximum of 6, 8, 10 or 12 sessions.

Types of therapy

A therapy session is a time set aside on an agreed date at an agreed place, which provides a 'safe' space, which is private, undisturbed, and cannot be overheard or interrupted. The counsellor will reach an agreement with you about confidentiality.

Therapy may be available for individuals, couples, families and groups, and there are different ways of working with people, usually referred to as 'approaches', 'techniques' or 'modalities'. Some of these variations are described below:

Individual therapy or 'one to one' therapy

'One to one' therapy, where the therapist and client (ie the person seeking therapy)

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are together, in the same room, is currently the most common way of receiving therapy but it is also possible to receive individual therapy by telephone or online (by email or otherwise, via the internet). There are online and telephone therapists, as well as 'one to one' therapists, in the BACP Find a Therapist directory at www.itsgoodtotalk.org.uk/therapists

Couples or relationship therapy

Besides working with couples who are experiencing relationship difficulties, couples therapists will usually also work with individuals who are experiencing these problems.

For more information see the BACP Finding a Therapist online directory.

Family therapy (counselling for a whole family or for some members of a family)

Family therapy is facilitated by one or more therapists and is available for all family members who may benefit from it and who wish to be part of the work. This might include parents, siblings, extended family, looked after children etc.

There are therapists who are trained to work with families in the BACP online directory or see the Association for Family Therapy website at: www.aft.org.uk

Group therapy

Groups may vary in size. The group members may focus on a difficulty common to them all and discuss their feelings and emotions together, helped by one or more counsellors, depending on the size of the group. Common difficulties for group discussion include bereavement, eating disorders, depression, anger management etc.

Therapeutic models in brief

Therapy may involve specific techniques or approaches which you might read about in your GP surgery and/or on the intranet. This means therapists have had different training and have different ways of working with clients, for example CBT, brief therapy, drama therapy, person centred therapy, psychodynamic therapy, trauma therapy. In addition, some therapists may have specific approaches for working with people with eating disorders, addictions, issues of sexuality, etc. It can be helpful to have a general understanding of the approaches offered by your therapist, to enable you to think about what approach would possibly work well for you.

For further information see www.itsgoodtotalk.org.uk/what-is-therapy/types-of-therapy.

Though therapists may train specifically in one model of therapy, many incorporate different techniques from other models if they feel it will be helpful for their client. For example, some may use art materials in individual or couples therapy, with agreement from the client(s).

Therapists usually work for a mutually agreed set period of time for each session. The length of sessions may vary depending on the therapist's training, how the therapy is delivered and also whether it is a specialist treatment. Therapists and clients need to keep sessions to a reasonable length of time, to ensure that they both can maintain their energy and focus and get the most out of the session.

In one to one therapy, a session may be time limited – usually 50 minutes to an hour per session. However, a specialist therapy, for example trauma treatment, may involve longer sessions.

In the initial meeting with your therapist, you may find it useful to discuss the way they work, i.e. their approach or preferred modality.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality is essential in a therapy relationship as part of building trust. (BACP Ethical Framework for Good Practice in Counselling and Psychotherapy [2010]) However, confidentiality is not absolute, and there are exceptions.

Sometimes, in the public interest, counsellors may need to make a referral to an agency or organisation (for example GP, police or social services) when there is a serious risk of imminent harm to their clients or to others, for example where a client is seriously mentally ill and needs hospitalisation, or in cases of child or elder abuse. These referrals are usually (but not always) made with the client's knowledge and consent. This decision will depend on the particular circumstances of each client.

There may be times when a therapist is required by law to break confidentiality, for example, about terrorist activities. It may also be a criminal offence to 'tip off' a client when such a disclosure has to be made.

Disclosures may sometimes be made at the client's request, for example, where a client asks for help when they are the victim of abuse, or for an assessment or report to help with a court case involving a claim for damages by the client.

You and your therapist should talk together in their

first session and reach agreement about the limits of confidentiality for your work together.

Therapists do not make telephone calls or engage in discussions about you to your GP, employer, partner, family members, friends or to other agencies to find out, clarify, or add to your personal information without your knowledge. This would be an absolute breach of confidentiality and trust. However there may be some circumstances when your therapist may be obliged to disclose information but your therapist should discuss this with you when agreeing your contract. You may wish to ask the counsellor to contact your GP and/ or other agency, in which case you would agree and confirm the issues to be discussed between the counsellor and other named party, and this would not be a breach of confidentiality.

In some organisational settings, such as GP practices, schools, universities and some therapeutic agencies, your information may need to be shared with the organisation in order to best help you. However, after discussion with your therapist, you should be clear about what information may need to be shared and with whom it may be shared.

Contracts and boundaries

Therapists should establish clear 'boundaries'. This is a framework where you and the therapist have agreed a contract covering the following:

- dates and times of therapy sessions
- how and when the therapist and client can be contacted
- agreement about the limits of confidentiality
- clarification of the nature of the relationship, i.e. that it is a professional one, where the therapist will not be a personal friend

Some therapists provide written contracts for you to take away, usually in their first meeting, stating the agreement you have made to work together. These are useful and if your therapist doesn't offer this, you may wish to ask for it.

What therapy is not

Therapy is not advice giving or persuasion orientated to the therapist's point of view,, although therapists may offer information and some therapeutic approaches may ask you to do homework as part of your therapy. Nor is it just a friendly chat discussing the week's events as you would with a friend. Talking with a therapist is not the same as talking with a friend, a parent or sibling, who would probably have an opinion about the issues discussed. The therapist is an impartial professional,

who is able to listen to you non-judgementally and to work with your emotions and not get emotional themselves. The therapist helps you to develop understanding of yourself and others and to find your own solutions, making no demands upon you except for the terms agreed in your therapeutic contract.

Therapy sessions are normally regular and not held at random, for example, two sessions this week, one next week and then 'see how we go'. Some therapy models allow some flexibility in the spacing of sessions. Sessions should not be held in cafes, bars, hotel reception areas, works canteens, or any place where client and therapist can easily be over heard and with the possibility of being recognised and interrupted by family, friends or colleagues.

Therapist qualities

Therapists should aim to be impartial, and be able to express warmth and empathy to assist you to talk openly about your feelings and emotions. They should also be non judgmental (this means not judging what a person discloses about themselves, their attitudes or behaviours); fair; open and trustworthy to enable a respectful working relationship to develop between them and the individual. Therapy is a very personal experience, for you and the therapist, and to a certain extent, feelings about the relationship will help determine whether you both can work effectively together.

The therapist should also provide a good standard of care for you, which includes being aware of their own training, experience and limitations and referring you on when appropriate if the therapist feels unable to assist you.

The therapist should be professionally trained and qualified, and have knowledge about the issues that you want to discuss. They should be aware of their own issues and support needs and also be receiving regular supervision. Supervision is a formal arrangement for therapists to discuss their work regularly with someone external in order to maintain adequate standards of therapy. (Ideally the supervisor should not know the identity of the client).

The therapist and their supervisor should be on the register of a recognised professional body such as the BACP, and, in addition, preferably accredited by them.

In the BACP Ethical Framework therapists are encouraged to develop their personal qualities in terms of their empathy, sincerity, integrity, resilience, respect, humility, competence, fairness, wisdom, and courage.

For further information/explanation: see www.bacp.co.uk, the BACP Ethical Framework for Good Practice

in Counselling and Psychotherapy (2010) (the *Ethical Framework*).

How do I find a therapist/therapy services?

There are several routes to finding a therapist. Your GP's surgery might have a therapist as part of the practice or have a list to refer you to.

An employer might pay for a therapy service for its workforce; this is known as an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) or Employee Assistance Care (EAC). Many schools and colleges have therapists for their young people, or may be able to refer you to a service. There are also many voluntary agencies and churches which offer therapy services.

There are numerous listings of individuals and organisations on the internet; the BACP Register is a list of BACP members who have met the standards for registration and it will also be possible to check which are on the BACP Register: www.bacpregister.org.uk/check_register. Many of BACP's members advertise their details on the BACP 'Find a Therapist' directory. All practising BACP members are trained and are required to be in supervision and to undertake appropriate continued professional development. All members of BACP including those on the Register are bound by the BACP Ethical Framework. Those entrants in the BACP 'Find a Therapist' Directory, who are not members of BACP, have to be members of other reputable professional bodies, with their own codes of ethics. In addition, some members have sought a higher level of quality assurance through BACP accreditation. Those members are clearly marked as 'accredited' on the website.

Libraries hold information on local and voluntary therapy services.

Private health insurance or healthcare may cover and include therapy services.

What do I ask when I find a therapist?

It can be useful to think about the questions you would like to ask the therapist at the first meeting before you arrive and perhaps write them down. Key questions to consider are about qualifications, availability, methods of working, cost etc. You have every right to ask the counsellor about their qualifications, supervision arrangements and who they are accredited by, before you undertake therapy with them. Soon there will be a new information sheet entitled 'C3 Choosing a Counsellor or Psychotherapist' where you will find more information on this subject. (See also Information sheet C1 'How to get the best out of your Therapist') both available from www.bacpregister.org.uk/public.

Ethical framework

Throughout this information sheet the BACP *Ethical Framework for Good Practice in Counselling and Psychotherapy* (2010) is referred to. The purpose of the framework is to give practitioners support and guidance in resolving issues that can and do crop up in their work. It is also to encourage practitioners to work ethically and to be aware of their responsibilities in delivering therapy in a variety of settings and within different organisations and also as protection for the public. For more information see the professional conduct procedure at the end of the ethical framework, where it describes how a client can complain if they feel that they have been damaged by a member of BACP.

Conclusion

This information sheet offers an overview of what therapy is and what it is not. It provides information about some of the different models of therapy to help to inform your choice. However, it is also important to choose a therapist with whom you feel comfortable, in order to help you make the positive changes you want in your life. The reading list, at the end of this information sheet, includes titles for those who wish to learn more about specific therapy models and to develop their knowledge further. It also includes titles and websites to help you on some of life's issues whilst you look for a therapist.

About the author

Pauline O'Driscoll is an experienced and accredited Counsellor, Psychotherapist and Clinical Hypnotherapist and has diplomas in counselling and hypnotherapy. Pauline has worked for employee assistance companies and voluntary organisations, taught basic counselling skills on counselling courses and co authored a Teach Yourself Counselling Course for Hodder & Stoughton, published in February 2009 and now works as a full time staff counsellor in a large government organisation.

References and other useful reading:

BACP Information Sheet. C1 How to get the best out of Your Therapist, Tessa Roxburgh, (2008)

Padesky, C. & Greenberger, D. (1995) *Mind Over Mood Change How You Feel by Changing the Way You Think*. (first ed) New York: Guilford Press.

Sage Publishers
'Counselling in Action' Series and Nutshell Books

www.allanturner.co.uk

A good selection of counselling books and resources

Other useful websites

www.counselling.ltd.uk
www.4therapy.com

Bereavement

Cruse Bereavement Care
www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk

Relationships and coping with grief
www.bbc.co.uk/relationships

Bullying

ACAS www.acas.org.uk
www.bullyonline.org (workplace bullying)
www.bullying.co.uk (school bullying)

Confidence

www.howtobooks.co.uk/family/selfconfidence

Depression

NHS guide www.nhs.uk/depression
www.netdoctor.co.uk
www.moodgym.anu.edu.au

Eating disorders

Eating Disorder Association www.b-eat.co.uk

Family therapy

AFT (Association for Family Therapy)
www.gestaltcentrecoaches.co.uk

General

BABCP (British Association of Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapists)
www.babcp.com

Gestalt Therapy
www.gestaltcentrecoaches.co.uk

REBT (Rational Emotive Behavioural Therapy)
www.rebtpnetwork.org

Westminster Pastoral Foundation
www.westminsterpastoralfoundation.org.uk

Help/support line
www.supportline.org.uk

Mental health

MIND (National Association Mental Health)
www.mind.org.uk

Mental Health Foundation
www.mentalhealth.org.uk

Saneline www.sane.org.uk

Relationships

Relate www.relate.org.uk

Stress

International Stress Management Association
www.isma.org.uk

Wellbeing

www.thesite.org

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It should be noted that this Information Sheet offers broad guidance, which sets out professional good practice, but it should not be substituted for legal and other professional advice, including supervision, applicable to your particular circumstances.

The individuals and situations referred to in the Case study and Vignettes are fictitious, for illustrative purpose only, and the illustrations should not be regarded as authoritative in the given circumstances.

BACP is aware that law and practice are always in a process of development and change. If you have evidence that this Information Sheet is now inaccurate or out of date feel free to contact us. If you know of any impending changes that affect its content we would also be pleased to hear from you.