

# Introduction to counselling and psychotherapy

## Client information

Kathleen Daymond and Sarah Millward from our Ask Kathleen service explain what counselling and psychotherapy are, how to choose a therapist and how to get the most from your therapy.

We use the word 'therapy' to cover talking therapies, such as counselling, psychotherapy and coaching, and 'therapist' to include 'counsellor' and 'psychotherapist'.

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## What are counselling and psychotherapy?

Counselling and psychotherapy are umbrella terms that cover a range of talking therapies. Counsellors and psychotherapists are trained professionals who will work with you over a period of time to help you develop a better understanding of yourself and of others.

Therapists are impartial. They will listen to you without judgement and work with your emotions without becoming emotional themselves. They won't tell you what to do but will help you find your own solutions - whether for making effective changes or for learning how to cope.

There are several different types of therapy and therapist. It's important to find a therapist and a way of working you're comfortable with so you can feel at ease discussing personal and emotional issues.

## Types of therapy

Therapists can be trained in many different approaches or 'modalities' and have different ways of working with clients.

They may work in one particular way, or they might use techniques from other approaches if they think it would be helpful for you. Some use specialist techniques, for example an art therapist would use art as a means of exploring feelings and thinking. Or they may offer specialist treatment for specific issues such as eating disorders, addictions or depression.

Therapists may see clients as:

- **Individuals (one to one therapy)**  
The most common way of receiving therapy is where you and your therapist are alone together in the same room. But you can also receive individual therapy by telephone or online (by email or via the internet).
- **Couples (relationship therapy)**  
If you're having relationship difficulties, counsellors may work with you as a couple or as individuals.
- **Families**  
Family counselling can be for the whole family or just some family members and may involve one or more therapists. It might include parents, siblings, extended family and looked after children.
- **Groups**  
Groups of people with a common difficulty, such as bereavement, eating disorders or addictions, may discuss their feelings and emotions together helped by one or more counsellors. The number of people in a group can vary.

It's useful to discuss what approaches a therapist offers so you can think about what might work well for you.

(See [Types of therapy](#) on our website for more information on approaches and modalities. You can also search the [BACP therapist directory](#) for counsellors who specialise in specific areas.)

## Types of therapist

These are some of the titles used for talking therapists.

- **Psychiatrist**  
Psychiatrists are trained and qualified doctors who can diagnose mental health problems and, if appropriate, prescribe drugs to help ease the symptoms. Usually they work in or are attached to a hospital. You would usually see a psychiatrist on an irregular basis, perhaps monthly to six weekly.
- **Clinical psychologist**  
Psychologists are trained in behavioural sciences. They can help explore unwanted behaviours and explain how these can be changed. They usually work in hospitals or NHS clinics and clients are referred to them by a psychiatrist or GP. Psychologist appointments can vary from once a week to once a month or so.
- **Psychoanalysts**  
Psychoanalysts are trained to help clients explore and analyse their own unconscious defences and internal conflicts. Once they understand these, it's easier to change unwanted behaviours or develop more useful ones. You would usually meet with an analyst two or three times a week for a long period, perhaps several years.

- **Counsellors and psychotherapists**

These are generic terms that cover therapists providing a wide variety of psychological help. They mostly work outside hospitals in a wide variety of settings including GP surgeries, mental health centres, voluntary agencies, organisations, schools, further education, the workplace and in private practice.

Counsellors and psychotherapists will help you understand yourself, your behaviours and relationships with others. You would probably see them on a weekly basis for a set number of sessions.

## How can therapy help?

Therapy can be helpful if you're feeling painful emotions or facing difficult decisions, if you want to improve or change your relationships, or if you'd like to develop a better understanding of yourself or others.

Perhaps something unsettling has happened, such as a bereavement, redundancy, divorce or health scare. There may be something in your past that's not been dealt with and is now interfering with your daily life. Or you may want help to cope with issues such as anxiety, stress or personal problem solving.

You may feel isolated and have no one to talk to, but sometimes even those with the most supportive friends and family can find it difficult to explain why they're feeling anxious or depressed. Or you might just find it easier to talk about personal, family or relationship issues with someone independent.

But you don't have to be in, or on the verge of crisis, before having therapy. You might be feeling dissatisfied with life in general or seeking balance in your life.

(See [What therapy can help with](#) on our website for information on how counselling can help with all these issues and more.)

## What happens in therapy?

Therapy is time set aside by you and your therapist to talk about the issues that have made you seek therapy. It's not just a friendly chat like you'd have with friends or family. Your therapist may offer information but they won't give their opinions or advice or try to persuade you to a particular point of view.

Therapy might include talking about past and present life events, your feelings, emotions, relationships, ways of thinking and patterns of behaviour. Your therapist will help you look at your concerns and identify the best course of action for you, which might be helping you to resolve your difficulties or to find ways of coping.

### Therapists can:

- offer a safe and confidential space to help you explore emotional problems
- help you make sense of your world
- help you explore feelings and thoughts to resolve emotional distress

- help you towards a better understanding of yourself and others, which may improve your ability to relate to others

#### **Therapists will not:**

- tell you what to do
- prescribe drugs - only an appropriate medical practitioner can do this
- offer help with practical problems, such as financial or housing issues
- provide specific information about health-related problems, unless they work in a specialised service
- meet outside pre-planned sessions
- talk in detail about themselves and their own problems

## **Therapy sessions**

Therapy sessions are held at an agreed time in an agreed place, providing a safe space which is private and undisturbed. They should not take place in cafes, hotel lobbies or any place where you or your therapist can be overheard, recognised or interrupted by family, friends, colleagues or strangers. Sessions are usually regular and not, for example, two sessions one week, one the next and 'see how we go' (although some approaches allow flexibility).

Talking about your issues can take time and you won't cover it all in a single session. Ask your therapist in advance how many sessions you'll have as you may only be offered a limited number. Brief therapy or short-term therapy, for example, can be a maximum of six to 12 sessions.

The length of a session can vary according to your therapist's training and how the therapy is delivered. For one-to-one therapy a session generally lasts 50 minutes to an hour but for specialist therapy, such as trauma treatment, it can be longer. Sessions should be kept to a reasonable length so you and your therapist can maintain energy and focus.

## **Confidentiality**

Your therapist will listen to you in confidence and will not talk to anyone else about you or gossip about what you say. Protecting a client's confidentiality and privacy is essential for building trust.

Your therapist will not discuss you with, or get personal information about you from, your GP, employer, family, friends or other agencies without your knowledge. If you want your therapist to contact your GP or any other agency, you should first agree this with them and confirm the issues to be discussed.

Within organisations such as GP practices, schools, universities and some therapeutic agencies, your information may need to be shared so they can best help you. Make sure you're clear what information may be shared and with whom.

## Disclosures

However, there are certain circumstances - for example if there's a serious risk of imminent harm to you or to others - when they may have to break your confidence. For example, if a client is seriously mentally ill and needs hospitalisation, or if the therapist suspects child or older person abuse, they may refer the client to a GP, social services or the police. Such referrals are usually made with the client's knowledge and consent but may not be, depending upon circumstances.

Sometimes therapists are required by law to break confidentiality, for example in the case of terrorist activities. In this situation it can be a criminal offence for the therapist to tell or 'tip off' the client that they've made a disclosure.

Disclosures can also be made at the client's request - for example if the client has been abused and asks for help or for assessment reports to help with court cases.

You should discuss confidentiality in your first session with your therapist and agree on the limits of confidentiality for your work together.

## Contracts and boundaries

Your therapist should agree a contract with you establishing clear boundaries. The contract should cover:

- dates and times of therapy sessions
- how and when you can contact each other
- the limits of confidentiality
- the nature of the relationship - clarifying that it is a professional relationship and the therapist will not be a personal friend

You can ask for a written contract if your therapist does not offer one.

(See our client information sheet on Boundaries for further information.)

## How to get therapy

### Through the NHS

Your GP can help you decide what type of therapy may be best for you and will know what is available locally. Some GPs have therapists within the practice and offer a free counselling service for patients. If not, they will be able to refer you to an NHS or other local service, or provide a list for you.

NHS staff may be able to refer you to specialist NHS mental health clinics, located in hospitals or in separate premises. Services such as CAMHS (Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services) may accept referrals from schools, Social Services or other sources. Some hospitals also offer referrals to specialist staff if you're receiving treatment for specific conditions.

In some areas, the NHS provides talking therapies under the IAPT (Improving Access to Psychological Therapies) programme. You can sometimes self-refer to these services. Try the NHS Service Finder ([www.nhs.uk/service-search](http://www.nhs.uk/service-search)) to look for services in your area.

**Advantages:**

- services are usually free
- therapists are likely to be qualified and experienced

**Disadvantages:**

- you may have little choice of therapist or type of therapy
- there may be a long waiting list
- you may be limited to six to 10 sessions
- there will be a formal record of your treatment

## Through your employer

Your employer may have an inhouse staff counselling service or offer confidential referrals through an occupational health service or Employee Assistance Programme (EAP). These services are designed to help employees who are having personal or work-related problems that are affecting their job performance, health and mental wellbeing. In some cases, you may need to get permission from your line manager to use the service.

**Advantages:**

- services are usually free for employees
- initial contact is usually through a telephone helpline
- there's unlikely to be a waiting list
- therapists are likely to have an understanding of workplace issues

**Disadvantages:**

- you'll probably have a limited number of sessions
- depending on the contract your employer has with the EAP, your line manager may need to be told that you're seeing a therapist. This should be explained at the start of counselling so you can choose whether to continue.

## Through your school, college or university

Many colleges and universities have a free and confidential inhouse counselling service. You can usually find out what they offer and how to make an appointment through the counselling service section of their website.

Some schools also offer counselling services. You can speak with a teacher or the Head if you feel your child needs therapy. Or if the school has a school-based counsellor, your child can approach the counsellor themselves.

**Advantages:**

- services are usually free for students

**Disadvantages**

- you may have little choice of therapist

## Through private health insurance

If you have private health insurance or healthcare, this may include therapy services.

**Advantages:**

- access may be quicker
- you may not need a referral

**Disadvantages:**

- the number of sessions may be limited, depending on your health plan
- you may have a limited number of counsellors to choose from, or be allocated one

## Through charities and voluntary services

Some national charities like Mind, Cruse or Relate offer counselling services. Or, depending on where you live, there may be local voluntary or community organisations, charities and churches that offer free or affordable access to talking therapies. You can search the internet for services or your local council, library or Citizens Advice Bureau may have a list.

Some offer a drop-in service while others require referrals from the NHS. Therapy may be free, or you might be asked to pay a small fee or make a donation. Check the organisation's policy before you attend.

**Advantages:**

- services are likely to be free or charge according to your ability to pay
- except under exceptional circumstances, no one needs to know that you're seeking help

**Disadvantages:**

- you'll probably have a limited number of sessions
- charities can be problem-specific - for example Cruse only deals with bereavement - so it can be hard to find the right service

(You can find information on charities offering therapy on the [Useful links](#) page of our website.)

## Through private therapists

Many therapists work in private practice so you can contact them directly.

If you choose to see a private practitioner, you'll have a wider choice and be able to see someone quickly, but you'll have to pay for their services. Private therapists charge on average around £40 to £50 an hour but this can vary greatly depending on location and services. Some may offer a free initial assessment or reduced costs for people on low incomes.

You can find numerous directories and listings of private practitioners on the internet and they'll often have websites advertising their services. As the law stands, anyone can call themselves a therapist or counsellor without having had any training, so ask about their qualifications and experience before you commit to having therapy with them. Where possible, choose a counsellor that is a member of a professional body such as BACP.

If the therapist is a BACP member, you can check their membership or registration by contacting our customer services on 01455 883300.

Our Therapist directory is a paid-for directory where BACP members can advertise their services. All therapists listed are registered members or accredited, which ensures they have demonstrated that they are qualified, professional and ethical practitioners.

(See [How to find a therapist](#) on our website for further information.)

### Advantages:

- you'll have a choice of therapists, although you may need to wait if your preferred therapist is not available
- except under exceptional circumstances, no one needs to know that you're seeking help
- you should be able to have as many sessions as you need
- you may feel more in charge of your therapy if you're paying for it

### Disadvantages:

- you'll need to pay, although costs vary and may be negotiable
- your therapist is likely to charge you if you miss or cancel a session
- you'll need to make your own checks on the qualifications, experience and suitability of a therapist

## Before starting therapy

If you have a choice of therapist, it's important to ask questions to ensure that a therapist is suitably qualified and experienced, and that you will feel comfortable talking openly with them.



If you're receiving therapy through the NHS or another free service, you may not be able to choose your therapist. But you can still ask questions to ensure you're happy about the service you will receive. You should tell your therapist if there is anything you do not understand or are not comfortable with.

Good questions to ask might include:

- What qualifications, experience and accreditations do they have? Are they on a register accredited by the Professional Standards Authority? Do they adhere to an ethical code?
- What techniques will they use? If you have a particular problem, such as an eating disorder or sexual issue, can they provide specialist help and do they have specific training in that area?
- How many sessions will you have? How often do they expect you to come? Will your appointments always be the same day and time or can this be negotiated? Does their availability match yours? What happens if you miss a session or if your therapist is on holiday?
- Is it easy to get to their location? If you have any special needs, is it accessible? Is there a waiting room if you arrive early?
- Are you expected to pay for your sessions? If so, what are the charges and how do you pay?
- How confidential is the therapy? What are the limits to confidentiality?

Many therapists offer an initial assessment session where they will explain what you can expect and answer any questions you may have. This can be an important way of deciding whether or not to go ahead.

You don't have to continue with a therapist if you can't relate to them or don't feel safe. You can stop at any time.

(See our client information sheet on 'What happens when therapy goes wrong' if you have any concerns.)

## Getting the most out of your therapy

You can get the best results from therapy by:

- being open
- saying how you are really feeling
- giving your therapist honest feedback on how you are experiencing the therapy

Good therapy should feel safe and enable you to take risks with the issues you are prepared to work on. This includes saying how you think that you and your therapist are working together.

Your therapist should be:

- impartial and able to express warmth and empathy to help you talk openly about your feelings and emotions
- non-judgmental - they should not judge what you disclose about yourself, your attitudes or behaviours
- fair, open and trustworthy to enable a respectful working relationship to develop between you. Therapy is a very personal experience and, to a certain extent, how you feel about the relationship will affect whether you can work effectively together.
- provide a good standard of care for you - which includes being aware of their own training, experience and limitations and referring you on if they feel unable to help you
- 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 be receiving regular supervision. (Supervision is a formal arrangement where therapists can discuss their work regularly with someone external so they can maintain adequate standards of therapy.)

If you are feeling uncomfortable, unsure or confused about anything that has happened in your therapy see our client information sheet on 'What happens if therapy goes wrong'.

## BACP's Ask Kathleen service

Our Ask Kathleen service provides help, guidance and information on what to do if you have any concerns about your therapy or your therapist.

Anything you say is confidential and you can speak with us anonymously if you prefer.

We're available from Monday to Thursday 9.30am to 4pm. Calls are limited to a maximum of 30 minutes.

At other times or, if you have difficulty accessing the service by telephone, please leave us a voicemail or email us and we'll get back to you as soon as we can.

You can contact us by:

- telephone 07811 762114 or 07811 762256
- email [ask@bacp.co.uk](mailto:ask@bacp.co.uk)
- [www.bacp.co.uk/about-therapy/ask-kathleen](http://www.bacp.co.uk/about-therapy/ask-kathleen)

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