

West Side Spirit
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Finding the Right Therapy for You

There has been a proliferation of therapies during the past 30 years and finding the right kind for you as well as the right therapist can be a bewildering and daunting prospect. Under the general category of Dynamic Psychotherapy, there are three major types.

Psychoanalysis is the most rigorous method, both in terms of the therapist's training and expectations of the patient, who is asked to lie on a couch facing away from the therapist and say whatever comes to mind.

Analysis of the inevitable resistance to such "free association" is a large part of the treatment as well as interpretation of transference, those feelings once felt for past significant others, especially parents, that are relived with the therapist. There is also a heavy emphasis upon insight into "old stuff" and making unconscious feelings conscious. This kind of treatment is usually costly in terms of time and money, and is conducted from three to five times a week. It is also a type of therapy most suited to those who will become psychoanalysts and who are usually fairly well integrated to begin with.

Psychotherapy, a modified form of Psychoanalysis, depends upon psychoanalytic theory, strives for insight and significant personality change but is somewhat less rigid in its methods. Treatment is usually one to three times a week. The client also sits up, facing the therapist, and more of a "real relationship" is allowed to develop although transference reactions from the past that are inappropriate are investigated. There is also more emphasis upon the present reality of the client and how dysfunctional patterns can be altered. This type of treatment is helpful for those who are interested in major personality changes, capable and interested in developing insight and who have fairly significant problems with self-esteem but who basically function well.

Supportive Psychotherapy focuses upon the "ego strengths" of the individual. It may or may not contain elements of insight, and transference is usually dealt with indirectly. Basically, it deals with fostering better functioning in the present through strengthening important ego functions such as reality testing, frustration tolerance, mastery and relating to other in a consistent positive way. This is helpful for individuals who find they tend to "act out" in inconsistent, impulsive, self-defeating ways.

Cognitive Psychotherapy is somewhat shorter-term treatment, for the most part, based upon the concept that we "feel" as we think. It attempts to change distorted self-concepts and ideas by recognizing dysfunctional thinking patterns. The result of changed thinking is often changes in behavior for the better and more positive feelings as well. Not a particularly insight-oriented treatment, focusing on the "here and now", it is useful for clients who have distorted, depressive thinking patterns.

Humanistic Psychotherapy emphasizes the quality of the relationship between therapist and client. It is a non-directive approach where the therapist reflects the client back to him or herself with the belief that inner resources and strengths will then have the opportunity to emerge. This method might be of special help to people who have felt very intruded upon in growing up and have difficulty having a sense of self in the presence of others.

Interpersonal Psychotherapy focuses upon the individual's relationships with others. It attempts to use the client's ways of relating to the therapist to understand what goes wrong in relating in close relationships. This emphasizes understanding the past to clarify present behavior. This method can be of real help to those who are eager to relate and be close to others but who somehow always seem to be "out of sync" when attempting relationships.

Behavioral Therapy is often short-term, looks at "faulty" behavior as learned in response to rewards or punishments rather than the result of inner emotional conflicts. A behavioral therapist will deal with very specific actions that are dysfunctional and prescribe "homework" and special tasks to produce new "habits" of behavior. It is a useful treatment for limited changes and can be even more helpful when used in conjunction with other therapies to address such issues as addictions, stress (e.g. biofeedback techniques) or problems in relating.

Short-term Psychotherapy can either be insight-oriented in the service of dealing with a specific problem or issue, or purely "task-oriented". Sessions can range between 10 and approximately 26 visits, and selection of clients, especially for the insight-oriented kind, is within very strict parameters.

Sex Therapy, sometimes with a sexual surrogate, is used specifically to correct sexual dysfunctions. It consists of education and the prescription of specific techniques to be put into practice at home. The danger with this treatment however, is that it does not address very real deep-seated inter-relational problems.

Systems Therapies are of Family, Couples and Group configurations. The premise is that such groups are systems that can be dysfunctional, as well as the roles that the individuals play within the particular system. Family and couples therapy is helpful when either system is in trouble. Group therapy is usually most effective when combined with individual treatment with the same therapist, who can then get a fuller picture of a client's functioning. A group can also provide deeply valuable support, insight and growth opportunities.

But how do you recognize a good therapist? The very best, in my opinion, are those who are warm and empathetic human beings who have considerable expertise in understanding human behavior. They are usually, whatever their particular theoretical framework, able to be flexible in tailoring the therapy to the needs of the particular individual. They are not afraid of their own or their client's emotions and are able to take risks in becoming emotionally close themselves. Furthermore, good therapists should be able to develop an accurate beginning idea of the client's needs and problems, even in the first consultation. And you should certainly have a feeling that you like the therapist-that you are in good hands. You also have the right to interview the therapist, ask about credentials, background, focus and experience. Has he or she worked with people with your kind of problem? How long will treatment most likely take? How often do you need to come? How much will it cost? And, does the therapist have third-party licensure, allowing insurance reimbursement?

Furthermore, if after a reasonable period of time, you find you are not beginning to feel better, understand your problems more clearly and have lingering doubts about the therapist, it is probably time to search for another.

Costs vary. Psychiatrists often charge up to \$100 and specialize in patients who need medication. Psychologists generally charge \$75 and up and may be either clinically or behaviorally oriented. Social workers charge \$55 and up and usually have a more holistic approach as they are trained to take the client's social environment into consideration. Friends, family doctors, professional organizations, mental health clinics and psychiatric departments of major teaching hospitals are good sources for referrals. Psychotherapy, whatever kind you choose, is a serious undertaking. Indeed, it is both a venture and an adventure. It is hard work, sometimes painful, sometimes exciting and exhilarating. It is, at its very best, a deeply satisfying experience that can change the way you feel about yourself for the better and your entire life in the most profound of ways.