

# Therapy for beginners

We use it as shorthand for seeing a mental health professional. But what does going to therapy look like? And how can it help?

WORDS LAUREN CLARK

**F**or a discipline once associated with stuffy offices and aloof old men peering at you over

their glasses, therapy has had a makeover worthy of *Queer Eye*. A growing dialogue around mental health has slackened the stiff upper lip, and so cemented in our lexicon are the words 'my therapist says' that an Instagram account named after the phrase has circa five million followers. Science confirms that therapy is an effective treatment for common mental health conditions like anxiety and depression; and if it's good to talk, now's a good time. The psychological impact of social distancing has affected a third of women, according to a new study, and mental health charities have reported a sharp increase in calls to their helplines. Not that you need to have a mental health diagnosis to benefit from regular mind maintenance. Much like a neurological MOT, talking about your feelings can prevent issues from piling up – one study by the Universities of Manchester and Warwick found therapy to be an extremely cost-effective method of increasing happiness. But with therapy an umbrella term for a host of techniques, where should you start? Before you type 'therapist' into Google, read on...

## IS PSYCHOTHERAPY THE SAME AS COUNSELLING?

These terms are often used interchangeably, but there's a slight difference. 'Psychotherapy delves into your past to find the roots of your issues,' explains Candy Bokungu, an integrative counsellor who works with NHS and private patients ([essentialcounselling.co.uk](https://essentialcounselling.co.uk)). 'The therapist will help bring memories and feelings to your conscious mind and use events that happened in your past to help you understand more about your current thoughts, feelings and behaviours.' Counselling, on the other hand, homes in on particular patterns of behaviour. 'It focuses more on what you're experiencing now,' adds Bokungu. 'It could be seen as a more pragmatic and symptom-oriented approach, with counsellors often specialising in an area of expertise, such as bereavement or relationship issues.' Traditionally, psychotherapy was seen as a longer-term approach, while counselling would last between six and 24 weeks. But these days there's little difference in length and focus. The important thing is whether the person you're speaking to is qualified to help with your area of concern. 'Both psychotherapy and counselling are suitable for many issues,' adds Bokungu. 'But if someone has a clear idea of their own issues and they don't want to explore their past, counselling might be more suitable for them.'

**WHERE TO LOOK:** Find a psychotherapist registered with the UK Council for Psychotherapy. Your counsellor should have a minimum Level 4 Diploma in Therapeutic Counselling and be registered with or accredited by the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP).

## THE ABC OF CBT

Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) is the favourite child of the talking therapy family – and an NHS go-to – because it's the most heavily researched. 'It works on the principle that your emotions and behaviour depend mostly on your perception of what's happening,' explains Bokungu. 'The way you think about things affects your reactions to events and people, so when you learn to understand your thoughts, you can train yourself to respond differently.' While it's used to treat bipolar disorder, OCD, PTSD, schizophrenia, eating disorders and phobias, it's particularly effective for depression and anxiety. One study showed improvements in patients with long-term depression who hadn't responded to other interventions, like antidepressants, while another paper found that 60% of people saw substantial improvements in their anxiety after 12 to 20 sessions. Despite its golden halo, CBT doesn't work for everyone. A review found it to be half as effective for treating depression as it used to be; partly because patients – viewing it as a miracle cure – had such high expectations. Bokungu believes it's best used alongside a psychodynamic (or person-centred) approach, which looks at the impact of the past on the present by focusing on deep-rooted, unconscious thoughts. There's also extensive evidence it works remotely – one study found internet-based CBT was as useful for depression as face-to-face treatment.

**WHERE TO LOOK:** Ask your GP about local services, and explore the 'Find a psychological therapies service' page at [nhs.uk](https://nhs.uk). For private options, try the therapist directory on the BACP's website, [bacp.co.uk/search/therapists](https://bacp.co.uk/search/therapists).







## HOW EFFECTIVE IS ONLINE THERAPY?

Zoom therapy, telemental health, digital therapy and telepsychology – all terms you may have heard that add up to the same thing: online therapy. It's become increasingly common over the past eight years, not to mention the past six months. As well as standard sessions with your therapist going online, sites like Talkspace and BetterHelp – both of which have corresponding apps – offer on-demand therapy for roughly £37 and £35 a week respectively. They allow you to message a therapist as much as you like, with the opportunity to schedule video calls. Despite the obvious drawbacks – tone of voice and body language become harder to analyse, for example – research suggests that this form of therapy (both messaging and video call) can work as effectively as the face-to-face kind for depression and anxiety disorders. Without the costs of a bricks and mortar therapy room, or geographical constraints, fees can be kept down, too. Many therapists also believe it can be a gateway for those who find traditional therapy intimidating or who don't want to self-define as having a specific mental health problem. 'There's something about video that feels more neutral and safe,' says Will Allen-Mersh, a partner at UK-based Spill, which offers free therapy – via messaging and video calls – as a company benefit through employers via Slack. What's more, most digital therapy gives you free rein to contact a therapist any time.

**WHERE TO LOOK:** Bacp.co.uk has a section on online therapists, or you can choose an app, like Babylon, PlusGuidance, BetterHelp or Talkspace.

## VIRTUAL REALITY THERAPY: JUST A FAD?

Virtual reality (VR) has consciously uncoupled from its gamer rep to become a legitimate platform to help those with certain mental health problems. In VR, people can experience carefully graded recreations of their difficult situation in the safety of their therapist's office. Have a fear of heights? You might be taken to the atrium of a 10-storey building to choose how high up you want to go. Gentle steps, rather than a shock to the system. 'This way, when symptoms come on, the patient can be coached on the most helpful ways to respond,' explains Professor Daniel Freeman, who's leading research in the field at the University of Oxford. 'The conscious awareness that these are simulations allows people to try things that they would be wary of in real life.' And while there are no direct comparisons

between face-to-face therapy and VR therapy, some tests for VR treatments have yielded faster results than what would have been expected via more traditional talking therapies. As to the question of who could benefit from VR therapy the most, research suggests it can help those with severe paranoia, and Professor Freeman's team is currently investigating the use of VR to help psychosis, in partnership with the NHS. At present, VR therapists (currently only available privately) will guide patients – who are wearing a headset – through treatment. But the future is likely to see them replaced by a virtual therapist giving personalised treatment, meaning millions could have access.

**WHERE TO LOOK:** Websites such as oasis-talk.org, michaelcarthy.com and londonanxietyclinic.co.uk.

## WE NEED TO TALK

### YOUR THERAPY QUESTIONS ANSWERED

#### CAN I TRY OUT DIFFERENT THERAPISTS?

Absolutely. 'You've both got to click,' says Claire Goodwin-Fee, an integrative psychotherapist and co-founder of Frontline19 (frontline19.com), who will have a 15-minute phone chat with prospective clients to give them 'breathing space' to decide. If, after you've seen someone a couple of times, you decide it isn't working for you, move on. That said, if you want to stop because you don't like your therapist, try to work out why. 'Normally, the reason you're feeling that way is because they remind you of the things you don't like about yourself,' says psychotherapist Julia Samuel (julasamuel.co.uk). Convinced they're not for you? Samuel suggests being straight with them and saying something like, 'I don't think we're a good fit.' Crucially, don't ghost them. This, after all, is their livelihood, and it will leave you feeling awful.

#### HOW CAN I TELL IF THERAPY IS WORKING?

'If you feel like your therapist gets you, that you can be yourself with them and that you can trust them, then that's good,' explains Samuel. 'The moments where you really need to give it time are if it's painful. Much of how you understand yourself is by going to places that you don't normally go to, emotionally.' But be honest with your therapist that it hurts. Think of therapy like cleaning out your emotional wardrobe, suggests Goodwin-Fee. 'Halfway through the clear-out, when there's stuff everywhere and your room looks like a mess, it's tempting to think: "All I want to do is go to sleep or watch Netflix." But you carry on. And by the time you finish, you're glad you did.'

#### HOW LONG SHOULD I SEE A THERAPIST FOR?

The number of sessions you'll need will depend on your mental health concern, but you may need more than the standard half a dozen sessions offered by typical employee assistance programmes (EAPs) – funded by employers for their staff – in order to make progress. Patience pays off, says Goodwin-Fee. 'After six sessions, I've only just got to know you. Some people will come for one thing, but the real issue is something else, so you need to allow time to get to the root cause.' She gives the example of clients who have a confidence or anxiety-related issue, but it later transpires there is an abusive partner involved. 'How long this takes – weeks, months, years – very much depends on the issue. But your therapist will be the best person to guide you on this.' **VR**