



# Talking therapies explained

# About this booklet

Talking therapies can help you work out how to deal with negative thoughts and feelings and make positive changes. They can help people who are feeling distressed by difficult events in their lives as well as people with a mental health problem.

This booklet is for anyone who wants to know more about different types of talking therapy or hear the experiences of people who have used them. It advises how to find a therapist who is right for you and suggests where to look for more information.

The booklet mainly uses the words 'talking therapy' and 'therapist', although the words that other people use may be different.

Thanks to everyone who shared their stories with us.

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## Talking is good for you

Talking about your thoughts and feelings can help you deal with times when you feel troubled about something. If you turn a worry over and over in your mind, the worry can grow. But talking about it can help you work out what is really bothering you and explore what you could do about it.

Talking is an important part of our relationships. It can strengthen your ties with other people and help you stay in good mental health. And being listened to helps you feel that other people care about you and what you have to say.



## **What are talking therapies?**

We often find it helpful to talk problems through with a friend or family member, but sometimes friends and family cannot help us and we need to talk to a professional therapist.

Talking therapies involve talking to someone who is trained to help you deal with your negative feelings. They can help anyone who is experiencing distress. You do not have to be told by a doctor that you have a mental health problem to be offered or benefit from a talking therapy.

*“Having someone to talk to who’s not connected to any of it means they can look at things from the outside which helps – you can explore and explain the situation better.”*

*“A therapist sees and recognises problems and can help you get to the heart of the matter.”*

Talking therapies give people the chance to explore their thoughts and feelings and the effect they have on their behaviour and mood. Describing what’s going on in your head and how that makes you feel can help you notice any patterns which it may be helpful to change. It can help you work out where your negative feelings and ideas come from and why they are there.

Understanding all this can help people make positive changes by thinking or acting differently. Talking therapies can help people to take greater control of their lives and improve their confidence.

There are many different types of talking therapy. See page 19 to find out more.

*“The therapist was always very positive and tried to help me with positive steps and getting me to recognise what I had achieved in life. I felt less like I was to blame for feeling the way I did.”*

## Stigma

Lots of people have talking therapies, but you could be forgiven for thinking it's not very common. People often don't tell their friends, family or colleagues that they are seeing a therapist.

There's a stigma attached to mental health problems which means that people feel uncomfortable talking about them. And people having therapy may not want to admit they are getting help. That may be because they expect other people will think they're 'mad' or tease them about being 'in therapy'. They may fear it makes them seem weak and unable to sort their problems out for themselves.

But asking for help is not a sign of weakness. It's part of taking charge of your wellbeing and doing what's right for you. Even so, it's still up to you whether you tell anyone you're seeing a therapist. Your therapist should not tell anyone, either during the therapy or afterwards. This is very important – any therapist who is listed on one of the registers of approved professionals will stick to this rule. See page 18 for organisations which list approved therapists.

## **Different words**

This booklet uses the words 'talking therapy' and 'therapist'. Talking therapies may also be referred to as:

- talking treatments;
- counselling;
- psychological therapies or treatments; or
- psychotherapies.

These terms can make talking therapies sound like medical procedures, but many people find talking therapies have a very different feel to the treatment you get for physical health problems.

The various terms used to describe talking therapies often mean different things to different people. Some people use them to describe the level of training of the professional delivering the therapy. But sometimes there is no link between a therapist's training and the name of the therapy they offer. There are no set definitions so it's important to ask about a therapist's level of training.



## When can talking therapies be helpful?

Talking therapies can be helpful in many different situations. They can help people with depression, anxiety, eating disorders or addictions and are often used alongside drugs your doctor prescribes. They can also help people with problems such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder.

Talking therapies can also help people deal with difficult life events such as bereavement, relationship issues, problems at work or physical illness.

They can help people with a long-term physical condition, such as diabetes, who are at high risk of depression. Talking therapies can help them manage their condition more effectively and reduce its burden on them and their family.

A very wide range of people can benefit from talking therapies, but no one type of therapy works for everyone. Different kinds of therapy work well for different people.



## **What is it like to have a talking therapy?**

The length of a therapy varies depending on what type it is and on your individual needs. Some people have just a few sessions. Other people see a therapist a few times a week for several years. A course of CBT, for instance, is usually between six to 24 sessions with each session following a structured agenda. In contrast, a client receiving counselling is encouraged to talk freely and the course of therapy may be extended depending on the client's progress. A session of one-to-one therapy usually lasts 50 minutes to an hour.

Talking therapies are not therapies that are 'done' to you by someone else. You play an active part in the therapy. That can be empowering at a time when you may feel you have lost control over part of your life.

**Q:** How many therapists does it take to change a light bulb?

**A:** Only one – but the light bulb has to really want to change!

If you are determined to get the most from the therapy, it is more likely to work. Talking therapies require you to be completely honest with yourself and that can be difficult. It may mean facing up to your fears, recalling distressing memories or talking about intimate topics and private thoughts and feelings. There may be tasks to do between sessions, such as trying out new ways of behaving or keeping a diary. It may be a while until you feel the results, but you get out what you put in.

## What makes a good therapist?

*“What I found really good was being able to talk about what was happening and have someone who was listening – she was really good at giving me space, listening to what had happened and discussing what might have caused it – not in a deep way but trying to help me piece the whole picture together.”*

Your relationship with your therapist is really important.

A good therapist:

- listens to you;
- values what you say;
- has your best interests at heart;
- helps you learn how to change;
- challenges negative thoughts;
- reinforces positive thoughts;
- checks you are getting what you want from therapy; and
- knows their own limits and when to refer you to someone else.

A good therapist concentrates on you – what you think is important in your life, what you want to achieve, what steps you could take to get there. They shouldn't tell you what to do. Your therapist may be highly trained and very experienced, but you are the expert on you.

It's worth taking time to build a trusting relationship with your therapist. Remember therapy is a two-way process. If you have any questions, ask them. If you are worried that you could become dependent on them, say so. A good therapist will help you deal with your worries and work out how you will manage when the therapy comes to an end.

See page 15 to find out more about choosing a therapist.

*"This wonderful lady turned my life around. I immediately trusted her. It's hard to explain exactly what went on, but her empathy and warmth and understanding were crucial. It's not what she said as much as how she related to me. It was a safe environment in which I could start thinking about and understanding my problems and think of things I could do to help myself."*

## Who offers talking therapies?

There are no rules about who can say they are a therapist. Talking therapies may mean talking about private thoughts and feelings when you are feeling confused or vulnerable so it's important that your therapist is professionally trained.

Several types of professionals may be qualified to offer talking therapies. Their job titles usually reflect how they trained or their way of working. They include:

- chartered psychologists – clinical psychologists, counselling psychologists, educational psychologists or health psychologists;
- psychotherapists;
- counsellors;
- psychiatrists; and
- other health professionals who have trained in talking therapies – including social workers, community psychiatric nurses and occupational therapists.

Recently, there have been more and more people offering 'talking therapy' style services, usually in business settings or privately. They include life and business coaches, mentors and consultants. People offering this kind of help may have done a lot of training or very little.

# How do I get a talking therapy?

## Through the NHS

Your GP, another health professional or a social worker may refer you to a qualified therapist. The therapy will be provided free on the NHS. In some places there are long waiting lists and you may not have much choice who you see. But the health professional should consider your views if you have a strong preference.

The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) advises which treatments doctors should prescribe. NICE recommends certain therapies for certain problems and these may be easier to get on the NHS than others.

## Go private

If you can afford it, you may choose to pay for your own therapy. Your GP, library, citizens advice bureau or local Mind association may have a list of independent therapists in your area. 'Therapy centres' often bring different kinds of therapists under one roof. The cost of talking therapies varies a lot. A session can cost from £20 to £100 an hour.

There are no rules about who can advertise that they offer a talking therapy so it is essential to check the therapist is listed on one of the registers of approved practitioners. See page 15 to find out more about choosing a qualified therapist.

Your GP may write to your therapist to tell them any relevant medical information before you start the therapy. And your therapist may write to your GP so they stay up to date on the therapy you are having.

## Other organisations

Some charities offer talking therapies free or at low cost, sometimes by using trainees. Some employers and colleges offer free therapy to their employees or students.

*"I had counselling through our HR department, mostly because of work issues. It was only five or six sessions. It got me to offload and helped me see where I was at the time and to move on. It was helpful to talk to someone impartial. My friends and colleagues were supportive, but talking to them I couldn't see the wood from the trees – I was too emotionally involved."*



## How do I choose a therapist?

If you have a say in your NHS therapist or if you're thinking about paying for therapy, you should feel confident about your choice.

Below is a list of questions to ask yourself before you look for a therapist.

- What kind of therapy would suit me? See page 19 to find out about different kinds of therapy.
- What kind of therapist could I work well with? For example, you may prefer a man or a woman, someone with the same background as you or someone your own age or older.
- How much time or money am I willing to spend?
- How far am I willing to travel?
- Do I mind where I see the therapist? Options include at a GP practice, clinic, hospital, community centre or in the therapist's own home.
- Who may be able to recommend a therapist to me? Friends or your GP may be able to put you in touch with a therapist they respect.



There are no rules about who can advertise that they offer a talking therapy so it is essential to check the therapist is listed on one of the registers of approved (or 'accredited') professionals. See page 18 for organisations which list approved therapists.

Professional organisations make sure therapists meet certain standards before they approve them. The therapists they approve must keep their clients' identities confidential. The organisations also have complaints procedures for their therapists' clients.

The procedures protect you if your therapist tries to take advantage of you when you may be feeling vulnerable. You don't need to put up with a therapist who crosses professional boundaries, doesn't respect you or isn't helping you move forward.

## Questions to ask a therapist

### About the therapist

- What are your qualifications?
- What other training have you done?
- How long have you been working as a therapist?
- Do you belong to a professional organisation?
- Can I see your professional organisation's code of practice or code of ethics?
- How would I complain about my therapy?
- Can I opt out any time?
- Do you work in any other languages?

### About the therapy

- What kind of therapy do you offer?
- Do you specialise in helping people with certain types of problem?
- What happens at a typical session? How long is a session?
- How often do you see people? How many sessions would I have?

### About the cost

- What is the cost for each session? Are there any reductions for older people, students or people on benefits?
- Do you charge for the first session, whether or not we decide to go ahead and work together?

When you meet a therapist for the first time (sometimes called an assessment), they will be working out if they can help you. That's your chance to find out about the therapist too. Do you feel comfortable talking to them? Would you be able to trust and work with them? What's your 'gut feeling' about them?

## Finding an approved therapist

These organisations have lists of approved therapists.

### **British Association of Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapies (BABCP)**

Website: [www.babcp.com](http://www.babcp.com)

Phone: 0161 797 4484

### **British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)**

Website: [www.bacp.co.uk](http://www.bacp.co.uk)

Phone: 01455 883316

### **British Psychoanalytic Council (BPC)**

Website: [www.psychoanalytic-council.org](http://www.psychoanalytic-council.org)

Phone: 020 7267 3626

### **British Psychological Society**

Website: [www.bps.org.uk](http://www.bps.org.uk)

Phone: 0116 254 9568

### **UK Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP)**

Website: [www.psychotherapy.org.uk](http://www.psychotherapy.org.uk)

Phone: 020 7014 9955

*“Having someone to talk to who understands and believes you rather than dismissing what you’re saying – someone who believes that what you’re feeling is real – that made discussing it much easier. I needed someone to believe me and say: ‘I understand why you feel the way you do.’ It helped me work through it so I could get over it.”*

## What kinds of talking therapy are there?

Different talking therapies are called a confusing mix of names and some therapies have several names. Don't let the jargon put you off! Behind every technical term is a way of working with people that is designed to help.

Therapies are usually divided into several broad types. But even therapists who offer the same kind of therapy will have a slightly different way of working from each other because all therapists have a personal style as well. Some therapists train in more than one kind of therapy. They may decide to combine a few approaches if that will help you best.

The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) recommends certain therapies for certain problems, but other therapies might work for you just as well.

*"I had a CBT therapist but I think she probably used lots of different things – in fact it didn't feel like she was 'using' anything – it felt like a natural process rather than anything very medical or clinical."*

## Cognitive behavioural therapies (CBT)

**How do they work?** By looking at how we can react differently to our thoughts and feelings (for example, challenging negative thoughts) and how changing the way we behave can help us feel better (for example trying new activities).

**What are they based on?** They are based on scientific methods.

**What form do they take?** Sessions are clearly structured. The therapist directs the conversation. They are focused on current problems and practical solutions.

**How long do they take?** Treatment is usually short-term and for a set length of time (between six and 24 one-hour sessions).

**Where are they practised?** These are being used more often in the NHS, especially for treating common problems such as depression and anxiety.

**What are they helpful for?** A range of problems including depression, anxiety, obsessive compulsive disorder, managing long-term illnesses, eating disorders, post-traumatic stress and schizophrenia. NICE recommends CBT for all these.

**Who will they suit?** People who want a therapy that works towards solutions, with clear goals and using practical techniques.

**What are some of the variations?** Cognitive therapy, behaviour therapy, cognitive behavioural therapy, rational emotive behaviour therapy.

## **Dialectic behaviour therapy (DBT)**

DBT combines some of the methods of CBT with meditation techniques. It involves individual therapy and group therapy. NICE recommends DBT for persistent binge eating disorder and people with personality disorders who self-harm.

### **Barry, a 45-year-old sculptor and artist, was referred by his practice nurse for CBT:**

*"CBT was amazing - it was so simple. My diagnosis is bipolar disorder and I had very low self-esteem and lack of confidence in my future. I had about 15 sessions over a year.*

*"The psychologist showed me how to notice what I was thinking and then how I felt afterwards, and to realise you can choose your own thoughts. I thought they were just random thoughts there to make my life a misery. But I learnt that at any time I could stop and say: "Why am I thinking that?"*

*"I had a pattern of thinking that I was educationally subnormal. CBT taught me that I was as intelligent as anyone else. So I put the thoughts on hold and said: "I'm going to give it a go". The main hurdles were looking at the prospectus, getting to the college and speaking to the tutor. But I signed up for a diploma and won student of the year.*

*CBT was the turning point for me to do that. The more I thought in that way, the more I started feeling better. And it's a bit like riding a bike - once you've learnt it, it becomes part of you."*



## Psychodynamic therapies

**How do they work?** By exploring how your personality and early life experiences influence your current thoughts, feelings, relationships and behaviour. Once you have this extra understanding, you can practise more skilful ways of dealing with difficult situations.

**What are they based on?** Originally the ideas of the neurologist and psychotherapist Sigmund Freud, with many changes over the last 100 years.

**What form do they take?** The therapist works with you to understand your thoughts, feelings, relationships, behaviour, dreams and fantasies.



**How long do they take?** Usually between several months and several years, although shorter-term versions are available.

**Where are they practised?** Often privately, and in some charities. They are available on the NHS in some areas.

**What are they helpful for?** Depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, long-term physical health problems, eating disorders and addictions. NICE recommends psychodynamic therapy for people experiencing depression alongside other complex illnesses.

**Who will they suit?** People interested in self-exploration who are willing to devote lots of time and energy to it.

**What are some of the variations?** Psychoanalysis, psychoanalytic psychotherapy, psychodynamic psychotherapy, analytical psychology, Jungian or Freudian analysis, focal psychodynamic therapy (NICE recommends this for treating anorexia nervosa).

**Liz is a 31-year-old GP who was referred for psychodynamic psychotherapy when she was at university:**

*"I was quite severely depressed as a teenager. I tried various antidepressants and some CBT-based stuff, but nothing was helping. Finally, my GP suggested that I try psychotherapy at my local mental health unit.*

*"At first I was sceptical. I couldn't see how sitting in a room with a stranger was going to help. I was quite a nightmare, trying to prove to my therapist and myself that the therapy would fail. But with psychodynamic therapy, the therapist is prepared to sit and wait out that part with you. She started helping me link the way I was thinking, feeling and behaving to what might have gone on when I was younger and that really made sense.*

*"Because she was there every week and accepted whatever I said and did, I started feeling I could really trust her. I had problems trusting people so the fact that I could build up this trusting relationship with someone long term – that was the turning point."*

## Humanistic therapies

**How do they work?** By taking a whole-person approach to your problem, using a range of theories and practices to help you develop.

**Where did they come from?** They were developed to offer an alternative to psychodynamic and behavioural therapies, focused on developing your full potential.

**What form do they take?** These therapies explore your relationship with different parts of yourself (such as your body, mind, emotions, behaviour and spirituality) and other people (for example family, friends, society or culture) and support you to grow and live life to the full.

**How long do they take?** Therapy can be short or long-term depending on the issues you need to cover, but usually at least several months.

**Where are they practised?** Therapists working for the NHS or charities and private therapists offer these therapies.

**What are they helpful for?** Humanistic therapies tend to treat specific problems – such as depression, anxiety or addiction – as chances for you to develop and grow. Therapists work with any issue causing difficulties in your life.

**Who will they suit?** They will suit people interested in exploring their lives and looking at their problems from a wide range of angles.

**What are some of the variations?** Person-centred counselling (NICE recommends this for children and young people with mild depression and sometimes for people with schizophrenia), transpersonal psychology, body psychotherapy, gestalt therapy, psychosynthesis, integrative psychotherapy, existential psychotherapy, transactional analysis, psychodrama and personal construct therapy.

**Penny is 43 and worked with a person-centred therapist during her stay at an alcohol day unit:**

*"I was referred to a unit that deals with people who turn to alcohol because of psychological problems. I was in a state of constant panic and had been drinking to keep those feelings at bay.*

*"There wasn't a set formula to the sessions. We'd just go and get a cup of coffee and I'd talk about what was bothering me. With person-centred counselling the therapist steers you through finding out more about yourself and developing confidence.*

*"My therapist believed in me from start to finish and you start to believe in yourself too. Sometimes he would throw in something that stopped me short and made things clear to me that I hadn't seen before. But you know you're not being judged and that this person is for you, not against you. He was interested in getting me to the point where I felt strong and secure and able to go out there and live my life to the full.*

*"Eighteen months on, I'd run a half-marathon. Because of the therapy I also went to university and I'm just about to graduate."*



## Other kinds of talking therapy

### Group therapies

In groups led by a facilitator (someone who helps to introduce members of the group to each other and who helps the conversation to flow), people find solutions together and learn from each other. NICE recommends group therapy for people with obsessive compulsive disorder and for children and young people with mild depression.

*"In group therapy you don't just talk about yourself, you're listening to other people – that takes the burden off your problems. You realise you're not the only one."*

## **Couples, relationship or family therapies**

Couples or families work with a therapist to sort out difficulties in their relationships. NICE recommends family therapy for anorexia nervosa, depression in children and families of people with schizophrenia. NICE recommends 'couples therapy' if partners have tried individual therapy and this has not helped.

## **Interpersonal therapy**

This explores how to link mood with the way you relate to the people close to you. NICE recommends this for people with eating disorders and various forms of depression.

## **Mindfulness-based therapies**

A therapy that combines talking therapies with meditation. It helps people reduce stress, switch off from difficult thoughts and feelings and make changes. NICE recommends this treatment to prevent people who have had depression from experiencing the same problems again. Other versions of this treatment include mindfulness-based stress reduction and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy.

## **Eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing (EMDR)**

A way of stimulating the brain through eye movements which seems to make distressing memories feel less intense. It is used for a range of traumas, including past sexual, physical or emotional abuse, accidents and injuries, phobias, addictions and fear of performing in public. NICE recommends for post-traumatic stress disorder.

## **Motivational counselling**

A way of talking about things you may be sensitive about that doesn't feel threatening. The therapy focuses on your hopes and ambitions and problems that could stop you reaching your goals. NICE recommends this for people with a mental health problem who have problems with alcohol or substance misuse.

## **Life coaching**

This uses empowering, motivational methods to help you reach goals or make changes.

## **Arts therapies**

These therapies encourage you to express how you feel through art (painting, drawing, music, theatre or dance). Art can help you work out how to tackle difficulties, release emotions and understand yourself better.

## **Telephone counselling**

This offers an easy way of talking to a therapist if you do not want to meet a face-to-face counsellor or if you can't find one. It is sometimes provided by employers and charities. Online or e-mail counselling is another option.



## **No talking required!**

### **Computerised cognitive behavioural therapy**

You work through a series of exercises on your computer screen and learn self-help techniques for managing problems in your life. NICE recommends 'Beating the Blues' for mild to moderate depression, and 'FearFighter' for panic and phobia.

### **Bibliotherapy**

Health professionals 'prescribe' self-help books which you can borrow from your local library. They will usually offer you these alongside other treatment. NICE recommend these for anxiety and obsessive compulsive disorder, and sometimes for depression.

## Support and information

See page 18 for organisations which list approved therapists.

### Health advice and information

NHS Direct phone: 0845 4647

NHS Choices website: [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)

### Relate

Offers relationship counselling face-to-face, by phone and through its website

Phone: 0300 100 1234

Website: [www.relate.org.uk](http://www.relate.org.uk)

### Cruse

Promotes the wellbeing of bereaved people and helps them cope with loss

Phone: 0870 167 1677

Website: [www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk](http://www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk)

### Witness

Helps people abused by health workers or social-care workers and works to prevent abuse

Phone: 08454 500 300

Website: [www.popan.org.uk/index.htm](http://www.popan.org.uk/index.htm)



# Mental Health Foundation

This booklet is for anyone who wants to know more about different types of talking therapy or hear the experiences of people who have used them. It advises how to find a therapist who is right for you and suggests where to look for more information.

If you have found this publication useful and would like to make a donation to the Mental Health Foundation, please contact us on **020 7803 1121** or visit **[www.mentalhealth.org.uk/get-involved](http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/get-involved)**  
To order additional copies of this booklet, call our publications orderline on **020 7803 1101** or email **[info@mhf.org.uk](mailto:info@mhf.org.uk)**

For more information about mental health, visit:  
**[www.mentalhealth.org.uk](http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk)**

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