

Frequently Asked Questions About Therapy

What is therapy?

Therapy (also called “counseling”) is a process of talking to a trained professional to explore our thoughts, beliefs, and actions in order to:

- Understand and improve the way we feel and behave. Therapy may include working to:
 - Understand the role the past may play in our current decision making
 - Explore our automatic thoughts and core beliefs
 - Increase our resiliency by developing new, more positive ways of responding to life’s challenges

Therapy can be helpful because the therapist, or counselor, is a neutral person who can provide unbiased feedback, encourage you to think about things in a different way, and provide tools to respond to challenging situations.

While listening is important, a therapist should do more than just listen. A therapist can help you make connections between your thoughts, beliefs, and actions; make observations; and provide you with opportunities to learn different ways of interacting with the world.

Who should consider therapy?

Anyone seeking to improve their mental health could benefit from professional therapy. People seek counseling for many reasons, including relationships, parenting, stress, depression, and anxiety.

Keep in mind: Mental health is not the same thing as mental illness. Everyone has mental health. It’s defined as our cognitive, behavioral, and emotional well-being. And just like our physical health, it’s important that we take care of our mental health.

Are there different types of therapists?

Yes. Therapists differ in education, training, and areas of specialty. When considering a therapist, make note of their:

- **Licensure:** All therapists must hold a license to practice therapy from a state licensing board. The specific requirements to attain licensure vary from state to state, but typically fall in three broad categories:
 - **Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC)** – a therapist who holds a Master’s degree in Counseling
 - **Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW)** – a therapist who holds a Master’s degree in Social Work
 - **Psychologist (Ph.D.)** – a therapist who holds a Doctoral degree in Psychology
- **Type of therapy practiced:** Therapists also focus on different ways of practicing therapy. Evidenced-Based Therapy (EBT) is any therapy that has shown to be effective in peer-reviewed scientific experiments. [Read more about what therapies are considered EBTs](#) on the American Psychological Association’s website.
 - One of the most common EBT types is **Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)**. This type of therapy focuses on connecting your thoughts and beliefs to your actions. Thus, the way to change your actions is by reframing your thoughts.
 - Some types of therapy, like **Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPT)**, help people heal from trauma.
 - **Family therapy** is another type of therapy that seeks to improve family dynamics.
- **Areas of specialty:** If you have a specific need, like anxiety or depression, you can look for a therapist who indicates they specialize in that area. That means they have had additional training on the topic and work with those areas more than others.

What should I look for in a therapist?

Research consistently indicates that people report the most positive outcomes from therapy when they feel that the therapist is a “good fit” for them. In addition to reviewing a therapist’s credentials (licensing, education, experience treating your issue), it’s also important to find someone with whom you connect. Some people prefer a therapist of a certain gender, race or ethnicity, and sexual orientation.

You may want to ask a therapist you’re considering for a brief phone interview prior to making an appointment. Some questions to ask during the interview may include:

1. What is your philosophy to helping people?
2. How long have you been a therapist?
3. How much experience do you have in my area of concern?
4. What can I expect in our sessions?
5. What is your cancellation policy?
6. Do you accept my insurance/EAP?

How do I find a therapist?

Finding a therapist who is accepting new patients and meets your criteria isn’t always easy, but getting the mental health support you need is worth the effort. Here are some suggestions to get your started:

- Ask friends or family members for referrals (if you feel comfortable discussing your interest in therapy).
- Reach out to your confidential Employee Assistance Program (EAP), who can match your needs with local therapists.
- Contact your medical plan to conduct a search of mental health providers in your plan’s network.
- Ask your primary care doctor for a referral to recommended therapists.
- Use online directories such as the [“Find a Therapist” feature through Psychology Today](#).

Keep in mind, it may take some experimenting to find the right person, just like in relationships!

Should I choose in-person therapy or virtual therapy?

Virtual therapy is proving to be just as effective as in-person sessions. The only real difference is that you are not in the same room as the therapist. The counselor may not be able to see all of your body language but can see your facial expressions. One advantage of virtual therapy is that you don’t have to leave your house. This can also be a challenge, as some people find themselves distracted during session. If you choose virtual therapy, prepare a quiet space with privacy for your session and ask household members not to disturb you during this time. Virtual therapy may not be available to some individuals depending on age and clinical need.

How should I prepare for my first therapy session?

Your first session is important to establishing a trusted working relationship. Sometimes people feel anxious or stressed about their first session. Preparing ahead of time can help reduce anxiety and stress.

Make sure to have your insurance card or your EAP registration number handy. The provider will ask you to complete some forms that ask for your contact information, basic demographic information, family history of mental health, and a document that explains the limits of confidentiality. Therapists are required by law to break confidentiality in situations involving child or elder abuse or if their client has imminent intent to harm themselves or someone else. The key word here is “imminent”. It’s okay to let your therapist know if you sometimes think about hurting yourself or ending your life. Thinking is not acting. In those instances, the therapist will help you develop a safety plan.

To make the most out of your first session, consider writing down the following information to bring with you:

- What would you like to explore in therapy?
- How long have you been thinking about this concern?
- What have you done in the past to address this concern?
- What’s worked and what has not worked in the past to address it?
- How will you know when you are making progress? What will you be doing differently?