

Talking Treatments (counselling and therapy)



This factsheet provides a basic description of talking treatments. It aims to provide an overview of what to expect from these treatments, what they involve and how you can get the best from this type of help.

What are talking treatments?

More commonly known as counselling or therapy, 'talking treatment', or 'psychological therapy' is a term that is used more by professionals than on a day-to-day basis.

There is a wide range of talking therapies available, and this sheet aims to give some information about the main types available. However, there is a basic premise that underlies all counselling and therapy approaches.

Counsellors and therapists provide a confidential space where people can talk about anything that is troubling them. They provide a non-judgemental, accepting presence where you are free to express whatever thoughts and feelings you wish to explore.

The individual sets the agenda; you can decide what you wish to speak about, and the counsellor or therapist will provide a listening ear. For many people, the sense of being listened to, and being able to speak without having to be concerned about being judged or about the emotional impact of what they're saying, is significant in itself.

While people often seek counselling or therapy for help, counsellors or therapists do not provide advice, and will not tell people what to do. This may contradict people's expectations or wishes, and some people may still seek this form of help. However, many people find it beneficial to be given the space to explore situations and feelings and to find their own solutions to their difficulties.

Talking things through and exploring them in this way can help people to find ways of managing their circumstances and feelings in a way that is more helpful and supportive to them. The process may help them realise that their current patterns of behaviour or thinking are not serving them well. The relationship with the therapist or counsellor may give them an opportunity to test out or explore different ways of being in a relationship without fear of consequences in their day-to-day lives or relationships.

Talking treatments alone can be effective in treating mental health problems for some people; for others a combination of talking treatments and medication may be most effective. Medication tends to work by treating the symptoms of a problem, whereas talking treatments aim to address the underlying causes.

When are talking treatments suitable?

Counselling and therapy can help with a wide range of mental health conditions ranging from depression and anxiety through to bi-polar disorder and schizophrenia, depending, to a large extent, on whether the individual feels able, or is willing, to incorporate this kind of support as part of their treatment.

For some, a talking treatment alone may be sufficient; for others, this treatment combined with medication may be most effective.

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There are times when a talking treatment may not be suitable, for example when an individual is actively psychotic. This is because, at these times, the individual has lost touch with reality and so will not be able to engage with the therapist or counsellor, or with the process, in a way that is helpful.

If an individual is actively using alcohol or drugs in a way that impacts on their daily life, they may not be able to make best use of a counselling or therapy relationship. However, individual practitioners may take different views of this, depending on their experience of working with addictions, or if it is felt that the individual has some level of control over their substance use and is still able to engage with the process in a productive way.

The issue of dual diagnosis, i.e. a mental health problem combined with drug or alcohol use, can be a difficult one both for individuals and practitioners. Some practitioners may insist that they cannot work with individuals if they are actively using and dependent upon a substance. The converse argument is that people may need therapeutic or counselling support to enable them to understand their addiction better and to find alternative ways of coping.

Medication, in the form of anti-depressants, mood stabilisers or anti-psychotics may provide a stability that enables people to engage with a therapist or counsellor in a way that would not be possible without medication; this combination of treatments can be effective for all kinds of mental health conditions.

Counselling and therapy can also be effective in helping people to come to terms with and accept their condition, particularly if it is a chronic condition. It may provide a means of exploring ways of managing difficult symptoms; it can also allow a space to consider and to grieve for the alternative life, ie one lived without mental illness. Conversely, it can provide a space where positive aspects of living with mental illness can be explored and acknowledged; this may not apply to everyone, but for some individuals this may be important as part of their personal way of finding ways of dealing with mental illness.

What are the different types of talking treatments?

Counselling

The words 'counselling' and 'therapy' are sometimes used interchangeably, and there is a fair degree of overlap between the two practices. A simplistic, but helpful, way of understanding the two processes is that counselling tends to focus more on the here and now, and problems that people are experiencing in their current life, eg difficulties in relationships, the challenges presented by being out of work, difficult bereavements, challenges at work.

Counselling may also be conducted on a shorter-term basis than therapy, and may have specific objectives – linked to finding ways of dealing with the particular presenting problem. Depending on the practitioner, the process may also be based in working on the conscious level of awareness and not attend to unconscious processes the way that psychotherapy does.

However, many counsellors incorporate elements of psychotherapy in their work; they may work long-term with clients and may also work with the unconscious as well as the conscious. Counsellors may also incorporate elements of other therapies in their work, eg using art or other creative activities to support their work.

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Counselling is provided in a safe environment and the content of what you talk about should be kept confidential. The aim of the counsellor is to help you, and they can do this in many different ways. They may just listen, as speaking out loud about your problems can help you put your thoughts in order.

The counsellor will not tell you what to do, and you will be left to make your own choices. Some counsellors, however, may go through a whole list of options, and examine the pros and cons of each option, so that you can make informed decisions.

Counselling is generally face-to-face, but can also take place over the telephone or via the internet. Counselling may be offered as a one-off session, for a limited period of weeks, or on an ongoing basis for several months or longer.

Psychotherapy

Psychotherapy is a term that covers a range of different therapy approaches. However, as with counselling, there are some common factors. When therapy is delivered on a one-to-one basis, it involves the therapist providing a confidential, accepting space for people to explore the issues that may be troubling them in their lives.

Psychotherapy can be helpful for a wide range of people, including those with a mental health diagnosis. There are similarities to counselling, as outlined earlier. However, psychotherapy is likely to be undertaken over a longer period of time, and perhaps with more than one session per week; this gives you a chance to explore past aspects of your life, as well as what is happening in the present.

While psychotherapy can also be used in a very focused way to address specific difficulties or aspects of a person's life, it can also be helpful when there is a wish or need to explore a more generalised need involving a wide range of symptoms, or to 'make things different'. As with counselling, a therapist will not provide answers or advice; they provide a space where people can explore options for themselves.

It can help you make connections between past events and family history and how you behave and react in the world in the present. Psychotherapy can provide a space for you to identify and express feelings you may not have felt able to do previously, perhaps because you felt you 'shouldn't' or because you were worried about the effect it might have on your family.

For many people, it acts as a way of exploring how to feel freer to express themselves, to understand themselves better, develop a stronger sense of self and how they want to be in the world. Depending on the relationship you establish with your therapist, it can act as a 'mirror' of how you relate to people in general, to understand the role you play in relationships and to explore how to make this work better for you.

Psychotherapy is also likely to incorporate a focus on the unconscious aspects of the individual. Sometimes unconscious thoughts and feelings can contribute to the way we react and behave. For instance, we may say or think things like, 'I don't know why I did that, but I wish I hadn't'; or, 'I don't know why I feel like this'. The process of psychotherapy can help to make these unconscious thoughts and feelings conscious. This awareness can be helpful as it enables us to consider options for reacting and responding in a way that was not possible previously.

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Psychotherapy is an active process requiring concentration, energy, courage, and a willingness to be open and honest with yourself and your therapist. This may not feel easy at times, but the therapist is there to help you with this process.

You may agree a particular timescale for therapy with your therapist, or the therapy may be open-ended and continue for several years. This is quite a commitment from both parties, and is something you may wish to discuss over time.

There is a range of different psychotherapies, including humanistic, psychodynamic, person-centred, integrative, psychoanalysis, and psychoanalytic psychotherapy. There is a degree of overlap between these different approaches, though each also has their own unique aspects as well. However, the most important aspect of either counselling or therapy is that you should feel comfortable with the counsellor or therapist and feel that you can work with them. See below for 'Choosing a counsellor or therapist'.

Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT)

Cognitive behaviour therapy combines two very effective kinds of therapy — cognitive therapy and behaviour therapy.

Behaviour therapy helps you to identify connections between particular situations and your habitual reactions to them, such as anger, fear, depression or rage, and self-defeating or self-damaging behaviour. It teaches you ways of calming your mind and body, so you can feel better, think more clearly, and make better decisions.

Cognitive therapy helps you to understand how certain thinking patterns may be causing your symptoms. These thinking patterns can give you a distorted picture of what's going on in your life, and make you feel anxious, depressed or angry, or provoke you into ill-chosen actions.

Combined as CBT, this approach can provide very useful tools for identifying the components that may contribute to your symptoms, or influence your behaviour. It can help you to manage your symptoms and feel more in control of your life. CBT is usually offered in the form of a series of weekly sessions for a period of 8 – 12 weeks. Many counsellors also CBT techniques as part of their overall practice.

Of the talking treatments available, CBT is the most widely available on the NHS. Its generally limited duration makes it more viable to be provided in this way and it can also be demonstrated that it provides useful tools to help manage symptoms.

For some people, this may be sufficient to address their difficulties; for others it may benefit them sufficiently to enable informed decision-making about other areas of their lives; for yet others, it can be helpful, while also identifying that there are other aspects of underlying symptoms that may need to be addressed in a different way. For some, as with all approaches and therapies, it may not be suitable for their particular needs.

Group therapy

Group therapy uses concepts similar to those described for individual therapy, but the process involves exploring and understanding the interaction and relationship between group members. The process is facilitated by a therapist and the group members' interaction with the therapist is also an active part of the process.

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Group therapy can focus on interpersonal relationships or on particular concerns shared by the group members, for example drug or alcohol use. Such groups may have a particular focus on learning more about the particular issue and developing tools and techniques to help manage problems arising from the particular issue.

A 'process' oriented group focuses on the actual experience of being in a group as the learning and development opportunity. For example, the process of expressing your thoughts, feelings, and experiences as they arise within the group can be the very vehicle by which you discover change.

Group therapy can be a helpful way of exploring how we relate to other people, how we feel about ourselves, and how other people experience us. It can provide a space in which to experience a wide range of feelings; this can include caring for and wishing to support other members of the group. It can also include more challenging emotions such as feeling angry with other members, feeling scared or anxious, apprehensive about how others see you, or about how you react to others.

When people come into a group and interact freely with other group members, they usually recreate those difficulties that brought them to group therapy in the first place. Exploring these feelings in the environment of a therapy group can help you to feel more confident about expressing a wide range of feelings, and develop a stronger, clearer sense of self. The experience of seeing how other people experience us can be particularly helpful for this.

There is a sense in which whatever happens for one member of the group happens for everyone in the group. This may be because you can identify or relate to what another person says or feels, or you may discover alternative ways of looking at particular aspects of yourself and your life because another member has demonstrated a different way of looking at, or experiencing, life. This process can help to form strong bonds between people in the group as each learns and develops through sharing their own particular experience.

Under the direction of the group therapist, the group is able to give support, offer alternatives, and comfort members in such a way that these difficulties become resolved. During group therapy, people may begin to see that they are not alone and that there is hope and help. It can be comforting to hear that other people have a similar difficulty, or have already worked through a problem that deeply disturbs another group member.

Group therapy may not be suitable for everyone, or may not be available in a particular area, but it can be a very supportive and effective form of therapy. Depending on the approach, groups may be 'closed' or 'open'. 'Closed' means that once the group has been established, the membership is closed, ie no new members will join. This allows people to build up relationships of trust and understanding, which, over time, allow the exploration of potentially painful and difficult feelings and experiences.

'Open' groups, as the term suggests, have a more flexible approach, with members joining and leaving in a more fluid fashion. Such groups will have a different structure and set of 'ground rules' to reflect this approach, although all groups are likely to have common ground rules such as confidentiality, respect for other members, and allowing space for other members to speak. The criteria for joining a group depends on the intention of the group, what subject matter is to be addressed, and who would benefit the most from attending it.

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The frequency with which groups meet and the length of time for which a group may remain together depends on the group's objective or focus.

Relationship counselling

While counselling support is often sought by individuals, it can also be very beneficial for those in relationships. As in individual counselling, this may be at times of crisis, or it may be used to help understand ongoing or long-term difficulties in a relationship.

As with other forms of therapy and counselling, the process needs to be voluntarily entered into by both partners. Sometimes one partner will be more receptive than the other, and this is an aspect that may be considered by the counsellor as it may reflect a dynamic within the relationship in general.

Difficulties can arise in relationships at any stage, perhaps shortly after it has started, or during the course of a long-term partnership. Counselling can be helpful at any stage; it requires commitment and engagement from both partners, and, like all forms of counselling, may also be quite challenging.

Particular events may be the source of difficulties or unexpected challenges, for example, pregnancy or the birth of a baby may trigger tensions or difficulties; infidelity on the part of either partner, communication problems, health problems, sexual issues, work- or finance- related difficulties can all be a source of difficulties.

Relationship counselling enables the couple to examine and decide how best to cope with such difficulties in a confidential environment with the help of professional counsellor. As with all forms of counselling, the practitioner has no 'agenda', and advice is not given; individuals are helped to understand their situation more clearly and to make decisions about how they wish to address their difficulties.

Options may include finding ways of working through difficulties while remaining as a couple, or a decision may be taken to separate or divorce. However, even when such a decision is reached, people often find they can do so in a way that feels more considered, having worked through some of their feelings and difficulties through the counselling process.

Relationship counselling can also be supportive to parents whose difficulties may be affecting their relationships with their children. It can also be helpful if parents decide to separate or divorce as they may understand their feelings and situation more clearly and feel more able to navigate what can be a very painful process for children in a way that is more able to cope with difficult and painful feelings.

Family therapy

Family therapy works with whole families or parts of families led by a family therapist. Sometimes families come to therapy because particular difficulties are being displayed by one member, perhaps a child. This kind of therapy may help the family to understand that such difficulties may be contributed to by all the members of the family.

Family therapy can help each individual understand the role they play within the family structure and how their behaviour and interaction with other family members can influence and contribute to relationships and behaviour within the family as a whole.

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The therapist can help the family understand how difficulties arise and provide a means by which they can explore and discover new ways of dealing with difficulties.

Family therapists sometimes work in teams so that different perspectives can be offered to the family. This may be useful for families, or stimulate a discussion that can help them consider perspectives that are new or different from those they've been living with.

This therapy can help with a wide range of family relationship difficulties; it can be useful in identifying patterns of behaviour that may have been problematical over long periods of time, even over generations, and explore ways of dealing with them differently.

It can be effective in addressing and helping to understand and manage eating disorders, addictions, and emotional and behavioural problems.

This kind of therapy is also useful when a family member has a mental health diagnosis. Serious mental illness in a family member inevitably has a major impact on the rest of the family, and the way the family reacts can help or hinder the patient's recovery.

Conditions such as depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia and personality disorders are all challenging for individuals and their families and family therapy can be a useful part of the care plan, cooperating with other professionals.

The challenges of counselling and therapy

While counselling and therapy are accepting and non-judgemental, they can also be quite challenging. This may be because you talk about difficult or painful aspects of your life. These may be the very aspects you wish to address in order to help you live in a way that feels more nurturing and stable; however, it can also be distressing.

Your counsellor or therapist may also help you challenge or question some of the beliefs by which you have lived your life and which may not be helpful to you. This can also feel difficult but ultimately helpful if you can be open to this approach.

This is one of the reasons why the pace of counselling or therapy is left with you as the client; you will be in the best position to assess when you are ready to talk about things that are painful.

It's important to let your counsellor or therapist know how you are feeling about the process; after all, it is for you. Sometimes people feel that the counsellor or therapist is the 'professional' and therefore can't or mustn't be questioned. However, the relationship you have with your counsellor or therapist is important. It may reflect how you feel about and react to relationships in general, and if you are able to use it as a way of testing out and being honest with yourself and the counsellor/therapist, there is a lot to be gained from it.

Sometimes people hit a point where they feel they don't want to carry on with counselling or therapy and are tempted to just walk away. This may be the decision you ultimately make, but it is always worthwhile talking it through with your counsellor or therapist so you are clear about your motivations and feelings. These conversations can be very helpful, and are part of the process that can help you understand yourself better and understand the ways you behave and react to particular circumstances and feelings.

Counselling and therapy are not 'soft options'. They require energy, commitment and courage. While you may not wish to discuss the things you talk about in therapy or counselling with

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anyone else, you may wish to let family or friends know that sometimes the process can be painful and difficult and you may need some understanding and support at these times.

Choosing a counsellor or therapist

As may be evident from the above description, counselling and therapy are challenging and difficult processes. There are a number of ways in which you can access this kind of support, depending on your circumstances.

The most important thing when seeing a counsellor or therapist is to try to ensure that they are the right person for you. As in any relationship, there are some people we feel more at ease with, more able to trust. This also applies to the counselling or therapy relationship, which is likely to work best where both parties feel able to trust and work with each other.

The way in which you access therapy may, to some extent, dictate how much control you feel you have over this aspect of the relationship, but even if you have been 'assigned' a therapist or counsellor through the NHS or a charitable agency, it is worthwhile discussing the referral with the referring agency if you feel the practitioner is not suitable for you.

Your doctor may be able to refer you to a practitioner on the NHS. These referrals are likely to be for shorter term counselling and therapy, and there may be waiting lists. Sometimes the waiting periods can feel very difficult if you feel you need help now, and you may wish to think about other support options during this time.

Another alternative for accessing counselling or therapy is through a local community-based organisation. A range of charitable organisations provide counselling and therapy on a low-cost or no-cost basis for those on low incomes. This may be provided by experienced practitioners, as well as by trainee counsellors and therapists who have undergone a significant level of training, and who are assessed as ready to see clients.

Your doctor may be able to provide details of such services locally, or your local council website may carry relevant information. You can also contact SANE Services (see below) for details of relevant local services.

You may also wish to access counselling or therapy privately. This may offer you a wider choice of practitioners and a wider range of approaches; however, the basic premise remains the same that the relationship you have with your counsellor or therapist will be the most relevant factor in the process.

If you are choosing a therapist or counsellor privately, it is important to choose a practitioner who is registered with one of the professional bodies that provides a code of practice to which registered practitioners adhere. These bodies include the BACP (British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy); UKCP (United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy); BABCP (British Association for Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapies).

The cost of private counselling and therapy varies; many practitioners operate a sliding scale of fees, with reduced levels of fees for those on low incomes.

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Where can I find help and support?

SANE provides emotional support to anyone affected by mental health problems, including families, friends and carers.

One-to-one support:

- Helpline: 0845 767 8000 (6pm – 11pm)
- Email: http://www.sane.org.uk/what_we_do/support/email/

Peer support:

- Support Forum: http://www.sane.org.uk/what_we_do/support/supportforum/

Details can be found on our website at www.sane.org.uk

British Association for Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapies (BABCP)

The Globe Centre, PO Box 9, Accrington BB5 0XB

T: 01254 875 277

E: babcp@babcp.com

W: www.babcp.com

Regional lists of psychotherapists are available free. The full directory of psychotherapists is available online.

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)

BACP House, 15 St John's Business Park, Lutterworth, Leicestershire, LE17 4HB

T: 0870 443 5252

E: bacp@bacp.co.uk

W: www.bacp.co.uk

See website for details of local practitioners.

United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP)

2nd Floor Edward House, 2 Wakley Street, London, EC1V 7LT

T: 020 7014 9955, fax: 020 7014 9977

E: info@psychotherapy.org.uk

W: www.psychotherapy.org.uk

Umbrella organisation for psychotherapy in UK. Regional lists of psychotherapists are available.