

Talking therapies

This factsheet gives information about talking therapies. It explains the different kinds of therapies available and how to get them. It also explains how you can get treatment on the NHS and privately. This information is for people who are 18 or over and affected by mental illness in England. It is also for their loved ones and carers and anyone interested in this subject.

Key points:

- Talking therapy involves talking with a professional therapist about issues that may be affecting your mental and emotional health.
- Talking therapies can help you to figure out what may be causing you problems and help you to learn ways to manage them.
- There are different types of talking therapy, including counselling and psychotherapy. Finding the right therapy will depend on your problem, what is available and what outcome you are looking for.
- Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) is widely available on the NHS. CBT mainly focuses on the 'here and now'. CBT looks at how thoughts can affect how you feel and aims to change these.
- All NHS trusts offer free talking therapies. You can usually self-refer to your local NHS talking therapies programme or you can ask your GP to refer you.
- You could get private therapy, that isn't funded by the NHS. You usually have to pay for it yourself.

This factsheet covers:

1. What is talking therapy?
2. What can I expect from talking therapy?
3. What are the different types of talking therapies?
4. How can I get therapy?
5. Are there guidelines on talking therapy for different mental illnesses?
6. What if I have problems getting therapy on the NHS?
7. Are therapists regulated and accredited?
8. Will my therapist keep everything I tell them confidential?

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1. What is talking therapy?

Talking therapy is a general term to describe any psychological therapy that involves talking. You may also hear the terms counselling or psychotherapy used to describe talking therapy.

Therapy should offer you a safe, confidential place to talk about your life and anything confusing, painful, or uncomfortable. It allows you to talk with someone who is trained to listen attentively and to help you improve things.

Talking therapy often takes place face to face. But you may also be able to have therapy over the phone, by video call or online.

Talking therapies can be useful to treat mental health or behavioural problems. You might be offered talking therapy and medication together.

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2. What can I expect from talking therapy?

At the start of therapy, the therapist will ask you about your reasons for coming to therapy.¹ The therapist is likely to ask about your history. The therapist will ask you specific questions to try and figure out what your needs are.

These questions help your therapist come up with a treatment plan for your therapy. You and your therapist should agree:

- what you expect from one another,
- your commitment to the therapy, and
- how to end the therapy.

You can go to individual 1 to 1 therapy or group therapy. Some therapies may be a combination of 1 to 1 and group sessions. The length of therapy can vary depending on the type of therapy and what you need to work on.

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3. What are the different types of talking therapies?

The term 'therapy' covers a range of approaches and methods. You may also hear talking therapy being called psychotherapy or counselling.

A therapist may use a range of techniques to help explore your emotions, from 1 to 1 talking sessions to techniques such as role-play or dance. Some therapists work with couples, families or groups.²

The different types of talking therapy are:

- Behavioral activation
- Counselling
- Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)
- Guided self-help and digital therapy
- Cognitive analytical therapy (CAT)
- Couples behavioral therapy for depression
- Dialectical behaviour therapy (DBT)
- Family intervention
- Individual problem solving
- Interpersonal therapy
- Mentalisation-based therapy (MBT)
- Mindfulness and meditation
- Psychodynamic psychotherapy
- Schema therapy
- Creative therapies

Below we have explained what each of these therapies are and what they aim to help people with.

What is behavioural activation?³

Behavioural activation focusses on dealing with current issues you are facing. It is goal centred and structured.

It helps you to understand links between what you are doing and your mood.

You will work with a practitioner to:

- identify patterns of behaviour, and
- create a plan to help you to focus on behaviours that help with improved mood.

You will need to be willing to do work outside of your therapy sessions.

It can be delivered as part of a group or as individual sessions.

What is counselling?

In counselling, a therapist can help you to find ways to deal with emotional issues.⁴ Your counsellor can help you to understand how you are feeling.

Counselling can help you if you are going through a difficult time. For example, a bereavement, relationship breakdown, redundancy or other life changing events.

Usually, you can only get a certain number of counselling sessions from the NHS. For example, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) recommend that for mild to moderate depression you should have around 6 to 10 sessions.⁵ If your symptoms haven't improved after this, this might be increased to 16-20 sessions.⁶

What is cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)?

CBT can help you to change the way you think and what you do. Making these changes can help you to feel better. CBT mainly focuses on problems and difficulties in the present rather than your past or childhood.

CBT can help you to understand how your learned thoughts and behaviours affects your reaction to situations.⁷

Below are some of the conditions CBT is often useful for:⁸

- depression,
- anxiety,
- bipolar disorder,
- borderline personality disorder (BPD),
- psychosis,
- schizophrenia,
- obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD),
- panic disorder,
- post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD),
- phobias,
- eating disorders,
- sleep problems, and
- problems related to alcohol.

CBT is widely available on the NHS. Guidelines recommend that all therapists should complete a relevant professional qualification.⁹

Sessions are usually between 30 to 50 minutes. You will usually have between 5 to 20 sessions, but this depends on your needs and what's available.¹⁰ There is more

information below on the recommended number of CBT sessions for different conditions.

What is guided self-help and digital therapy?¹¹

Guided self-help helps you to think about how your thoughts, beliefs, feelings, and behaviour all affect each other. It gives coping skills for how to manage areas of your life.

You will work through digital or printed resources alone. But you will have regular support from a practitioner. Support can be delivered in person, by phone or online.

Your treatment will be made up of:

- cognitive behavioural therapy,
- structured behavioural activation,
- problem solving, or
- psychoeducation.

This type of treatment may suit you if you:

- need more flexibility due to other commitments,
- have access to a computer,
- prefer digital therapy,
- have self-motivation, and
- are willing to work alone for some of your treatment.

What is cognitive analytical therapy (CAT)?¹²

CAT looks at the relationships you had in your childhood. It helps you to understand why you may have learned unhealthy or unhelpful behaviour.

It can help you to look at healthy and helpful techniques to manage your relationships and deal with difficult emotions.

What is couples' behavioural therapy for depression?¹³

Couples' behavioural therapy is a talking therapy. It should be considered for you if:

- your relationship could be contributing to your depression, or
- it would be helpful for you to have your partner involved in your treatment.

You should be given 15 – 20 sessions over 5 to 6 months.

What is dialectical behaviour therapy (DBT)?

DBT helps you to become more aware of your emotions and learn healthy ways to deal with them. The main purpose of DBT is to help you to break the cycle of feeling very strong emotions like being vulnerable and worthless.

DBT aims to help you learn that your emotions are valid and acceptable. And ways to be open to new ideas or other people's opinions that may be different from yours.¹⁴

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) recommend DBT for women with borderline personality disorder and significant self-harming behaviour.¹⁵

You will be expected to go to a combination of group sessions, one-to-one sessions, and education groups.

What is family intervention?

Family intervention is a type of therapy which is used for psychosis-based mental illness, e.g. schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorder, bipolar disorder, borderline personality disorder.

Family intervention is where you and your family work with mental health professionals to help you to manage your relationships. This might be offered to people who you live with or who you are in close contact with.

The support that you and your family are given will depend on what problems there are and what preferences you all have. This could be group family sessions or individual sessions.

Your family should get support for 3 months to 1 year and should have at least 10 planned sessions.¹⁶

Family intervention can be used to:^{17,18}

- learn more about your symptoms, and
- improve communication among family members.

Family intervention could help you and your family to:

- learn more about your symptoms,
- understand what is happening to you,
- improve communication with each other,
- know how to support each other,
- think positively,
- become more independent,

- be able to solve problems with each other,
- know how to manage a crisis, and
- improve mental wellbeing.

What is individual problem-solving?¹⁹

Individual problem-solving deals with current issues you are facing. It is goal focussed and structured.

You will work with a practitioner to:

- identify problems,
- think about different ways to fix problems,
- create and follow a plan, and
- review your plan to see if it has helped you to resolve your problems.

You will need to be willing to do work outside of your sessions.

What is interpersonal psychotherapy (IPT)?²⁰

Interpersonal Psychotherapy (IPT) is a short-term therapy used for the treatment of depression. The therapy focuses on your relationships with other people in the present or in the past. It can help you to identify issues that are causing you to feel depressed.

What is mentalisation-based therapy (MBT)?²¹

Mentalisation-based therapy (MBT) is a type of long-term psychotherapy.

Mentalisation is your ability to understand the mental state that underlies behaviour, in you or others. Mentalisation is something we all use in everyday life. Some people find it more difficult to mentalise in certain situations than others.

MBT helps to improve your capacity to mentalise. It helps you to look at what you and others are thinking about and how this could create helpful or unhelpful behaviours.

What is mindfulness and meditation?²²

Mindfulness and mediation helps you to focus on the present moment. It does this by using techniques like concentrating on thoughts and feelings, being aware of bodily sensations and controlled breathing.

It can help you to become more aware of your thoughts and feelings, rather than helping you to change them.

Mindfulness and meditation may be difficult if you are having very distressing thoughts. Or you find it difficult to focus on your body.

You might be offered group mindfulness with a practitioner.

You will need to be willing to complete homework in between sessions. This might include using mindfulness recordings at home.

What is psychodynamic psychotherapy?²³

Psychodynamic therapy focuses on helping you understand how your past experiences may shape current behaviour. This type of therapy can help you discuss feelings you have about yourself and other people. Particularly family and those close to you.²⁴

Psychodynamic techniques can also be used in individual sessions, couple's sessions, group psychotherapy sessions, and within family therapy.²⁵

What is schema therapy?²⁶

Schema therapy can help you to change negative patterns or beliefs that you may have lived with for a long time. These patterns are called 'schemas.'

People can develop schemas during childhood but also as adults. Some common schemas that people may experience could be, feeling abandoned, feeling vulnerable or afraid, or feeling very negative about the future.

Schema therapy looks at how you may have developed unhelpful behaviours, patterns of thinking and coping strategies. With help from the therapist, you can learn healthier ways to think and respond to situations.

What are creative therapies?

Creative therapies use activities such as art and drama to:²⁷

- make you more in touch with how you feel,
- improve how you communicate with other people,
- make you feel less anxious, or
- make you feel better about yourself.

Art therapy encourages you to express emotions and explore your problems using a wide range of art materials. Art therapy can be helpful to people who may have difficulty expressing themselves in words.²⁸

Drama therapy uses drama or theatrical techniques, such as roleplay, mime and storytelling) to help you express yourself and understand how you feel.²⁹

There is a wide range of other therapies available and the one that suits you may not be in the list above. You can get more information about different therapies available

by contacting the [UK Council For Psychotherapy](#) or [British Association of Counselling and psychotherapy](#).

Their details are in the Useful contacts section at the [end of this factsheet](#).

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4. How can I get therapy?

What are NHS talking therapy services?

The following things apply to NHS talking therapy services.

- Provide talking therapies such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), group therapy and counselling.
- They sometimes provide a treatment called eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing (EMDR) for trauma-based conditions, including PTSD.
- Usually provide online tools too.
- Treat mild to moderate anxiety and depression, and associated conditions.
- Are free to use.
- Are available in all areas of England.

You can self-refer to your local NHS talking therapy service. This means that you can contact them directly to get an appointment, so you do not have to see your GP to do this.

Your local service can tell you what therapies are available and how long you might have to wait to get it.

You will normally get a telephone assessment to begin with to talk about your condition and symptoms. This will help the service to decide if it is right for you and what therapies are suitable.

The service will only treat mild to moderate mental health symptoms. The service might think that you have severe or complex symptoms. If they do, they will refer you to a specialist NHS mental health team. Or say you should see your GP to get a referral.

You can find your local NHS talking therapy service by:

- searching on the following NHS website: www.nhs.uk/mental-health/talking-therapies-medicine-treatments/talking-therapies-and-counselling/nhs-talking-therapies,
- calling NHS 111 and asking, or
- asking your GP.

How long should I wait to access NHS talking therapy services?

The NHS targets target for NHS talking therapy services are:³⁰

- 75% of patients should have a first appointment within 6 weeks of referral, and
- 95% should have a first appointment within 18 weeks of referral.

The latest NHS figures from 2024 show that 92.1% of referrals waited less than 6 weeks to access NHS Talking Therapies services.³¹

Your first appointment is an assessment to see what your needs are. At a later date you will get your first session of therapy, if the service is right for you.

The NHS do not publish targets for waiting times for the first session of therapy. So, it might take a while before you actually start therapy.

When might I be referred to an NHS specialist mental health team?

Your GP or another medical professional might refer you to an NHS specialist mental health team for talking therapy and other support if:

- you have had therapy from an NHS talking therapy service, but you are still unwell and need more specialist support, or
- your local NHS talking therapy service have assessed you and say you need more specialist support.

They can offer you therapy such as psychodynamic therapy or dialectical behavioural therapy (DBT).

If you are under a community mental health team, your care coordinator or psychiatrist will be responsible for organising NHS therapy.

Your GP or mental health professional can pass your details to a therapist or local therapy service. This is called a referral.

How can I get private therapy?

How much does private therapy cost?

Private therapy is therapy that isn't funded by the NHS. You have to pay for it yourself or you may have cover through an insurance policy.

The cost of therapy will be different across the country and by therapist. An average cost of a session is £40 to £80. But this is average cost and it is likely to be higher in London.

You may get your first session free. Or if you're a student, claim welfare benefits or on a low income you may get reduced rates.

You can ask about charges and agree a price before you start your therapy sessions. It is important to understand the terms and conditions of seeing the therapist and payments before you agree to anything.

What are the benefits of private therapy?

The benefits of private therapy are:

- you have more choice,
- there may be shorter waiting times, and
- you can be more flexible about who you see.

What should I look for when choosing a therapist?

We always advise that you find a therapist who is a member of a professional body. This means that they will meet certain standards, have a complaints procedure and follow a code of ethics.

You can search for private therapists who are members of professional bodies on the following websites:

- **British Association of Counsellors and Psychotherapists:** www.bacp.co.uk/search/Therapists
- **UK Council for Psychotherapy:** www.psychotherapy.org.uk
- **The National Counselling Society:** <https://nationalcounsellingsociety.org>

You can search for private therapists in your local area on the website below. All professionals are asked to provide evidence of professional body membership before they can be listed:

- **Counselling Directory:** www.counselling-directory.org.uk

How can I get free or low-cost talking therapy?

You might be able to get talking therapy through:

- Employee Assistance Programme (EAP)
- Counselling for students
- Counselling through charities

Employee Assistance Programme (EAP)

If you are employed, your employer may pay for counselling through an EAP. You can find out about this service by asking your manager or your human resources (HR) department. It is usually bigger organisations that pay for EAP.

Counselling for students

If you are a student, you may be able to get free counselling through your university. Talk to your tutor or student's union for more information.

Counselling through charities

You can search online to see if you can find any charities that provide free or low-cost talking therapy. You can try terms such as

- free counselling in (town where you live)
- low cost counselling in (county or London borough where you live)

You can also check the following website for free or low-cost therapists:

<https://freepsychotherapynetwork.com/organisations-offering-low-cost-psychotherapy>

For bereavement counselling you could try the charities Cruse Bereavement Care or Sue Ryder. You can find their details at in the Useful contacts section at end of this factsheet.

Anxiety UK offer discounted therapy to their members. You can read more about membership and therapy costs on their website. You can find their details in the Useful contacts section at the end of this factsheet.

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5. Are there guidelines on talking therapy for different mental illnesses?

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) produces guidance for the NHS on how to treat certain health conditions.

The NHS doesn't have to follow NICE recommendations, but their guidance can be useful when asking your doctor for support.

This section looks at what NICE recommends for some of the most common mental illnesses. You can see all the NICE guidance at www.nice.org.uk. If your condition isn't on the list, you could talk to your mental health worker for advice.

6. What if I have problems getting therapy on the NHS?

You may come across some problems getting talking therapy on the NHS. Some of these problems may include the following.

- Long waiting lists.
- You didn't get enough sessions.
- Your GP does not understand mental health conditions or treatment.
- Talking therapy isn't included in your care plan.
- Your healthcare professionals don't think you need therapy.
- The therapy you want isn't available in your local area.

There are some things you can do such as:

- get the support of an advocate,
- ask for a second opinion of your treatment plan,
- ask for a review of your care plan, or
- make a complaint.

You can find more information about:

- Advocacy for mental health - Making your voice heard
- Complaining about the NHS and social services
- Second opinions - About your mental health diagnosis or treatment
- NHS treatment - Your rights

at www.rethink.org. Or call our General Enquiries team on 0121 522 7007 and ask them to send you a copy of our factsheet.

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7. Are therapists regulated and accredited?

There is no standard regulation system for therapists. This means someone can advertise themselves and work as a therapist without being checked or having appropriate training.

If you are thinking about using a private therapist, it is important to consider their qualifications. Therapists can get a certificate or accreditation, which shows that they meet certain standards.

By registering with accredited bodies, therapists agree to be checked to see if they are following professional standards. It is important to check that your therapist is registered with an accreditation body.

All accredited therapists must show that they meet certain standards.³² For example, having appropriate training and qualifications working to a code of ethics.

These organisations provide lists of accredited therapists in the UK.

- Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC)
- British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP)
- UK Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP)
- British Psychological Society (BPS)

You can find their contact details in the Useful contacts section at the [end of this factsheet](#).

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8. Will my therapist keep everything I tell them confidential?

All accredited therapists must work to a code of ethics.³³

Part of the code of ethics should include a section on client confidentiality. This should explain how they will treat the information you share with them. This includes things like keeping records and sharing of information with other health professionals.

They should explain the situations when they might tell other people your confidential information. This might be if you or someone else is at risk of harm.³⁴

If you have any concerns about confidentiality, you should ask to see what set of ethics and standards your therapist follows. You can ask for their confidentiality policy.

You can find an example of the **UK Council for Psychotherapy** ethical principles and code of conduct here: www.psychotherapy.org.uk/ukcp-members/standards-guidance-and-policies

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Useful Contacts

British Psychotherapy Foundation

An organisation of psychotherapists who are working to ensure that the benefits of psychotherapy are available to as many people who need it as possible.

Phone: 0208 452 9823

Address: 37 Mapesbury Road, London, NW2 4HJ

Email: enquiries@bpf-psychotherapy.org.uk

Website: www.britishpsychotherapyfoundation.org.uk

British Psychological Society

The representative body for psychologists in the UK.

Phone: 0207 330 0890

Address: St Andrews House, 48 Princess Road East, Leicester, LE1 7DR

Website: www.bps.org.uk

British Psychoanalytic Council

The British Psychoanalytic Council is a professional association and voluntary regulator of the psychoanalytic psychotherapy profession.

Phone: 0207 561 9240

Address: Suite 7, 19-23 Wedmore Street, London, N19 4RU

Email: hello@bpc.org.uk

Website: www.bpc.org.uk

Did this help?

We would love to know if this information helped you or if you found any issues with this page. You can email us at feedback@rethink.org

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