

What is Psychotherapy?



Psychotherapy involves communication between patients and therapists that is intended to help people:

- Find relief from emotional distress, as in becoming less anxious, fearful, or depressed.
- Seek solutions to problems in their lives, such as dealing with disappointment, grief, family issues, and job or career dissatisfaction.
- Modify ways of thinking and acting that are preventing them from working productively and enjoying personal relationships.

Psychotherapy begins with some discussion of a person's background and the concerns that led him or her to seek help. Following this initial assessment, the patient and therapist come to an agreement, called the *treatment contract*. The treatment contract specifies the goals of treatment, treatment procedures, and a regular schedule for the time, place, and duration of their treatment sessions. Sometimes this treatment contract is written down explicitly, but more often it is discussed between patient and therapist.

Talking with a psychotherapist differs from talking with a friend in three respects that increase its likelihood of being helpful:

- Friends may be able and willing to listen and give advice, but qualified and duly licensed psychotherapists are trained professionals with specialized education and experience in understanding psychological problems.
- Whereas friendships are typically mutual relationships in which people take turns being helpful to each other, psychotherapy is devoted entirely to the patient's welfare. Psychotherapy is focused solely on the patient's needs for symptom relief, problem solutions, or life style changes.
- In contrast to the mutuality, informality, and multiple shared interests that usually characterize friendships, psychotherapy involves a formal commitment to meet regularly at a designated time, to talk just about the patient's concerns, and to continue meeting as long as doing so serves the patient's best interests.

Many different kinds of psychotherapy have proved effective in helping people feel better, resolve problems in living, and modify their attitudes and behavior in constructive ways. Knowledgeable psychotherapists select and recommend a treatment approach that is known to be well-suited for addressing a patient's needs and concerns, and they tailor their procedures to fit each individual patient's personality style and life circumstances.