



Therapy FAQs: A Beginner's Guide

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What is therapy?

According to the American Psychological Association, therapy is a collaborative treatment for mental, emotional, and behavioral issues based on the relationship between an individual and their provider. A therapist provides a supportive environment that allows clients to talk openly with someone who is objective, neutral, and non-judgmental. Most therapy focuses on individuals, although therapists also work with couples, families, and groups.

Deciding to seek help can be the hardest part of the journey, and this guide aims to make the process less overwhelming. Remember, therapy is a personal journey, and finding the right therapist and approach that resonates with you is essential for a positive experience.



- Therapy is like having a deep conversation with a close, objective friend who supports you in managing your life better.
- It's an opportunity to talk through your experiences and emotions in a non-judgmental space.
- Therapy can help with specific symptom-reduction goals or provide time for reflection and growth.
- Therapy can be effective for a wide variety of mental, emotional, and behavioral concerns ranging from challenges with significant life events, coping with stress, conflicts in a relationship, substance abuse/misuse, and more.
- The first session (often called the intake or assessment session) involves getting to know your therapist and discussing your reasons for seeking help. Subsequent sessions usually follow a treatment plan and include ways to track progress.
- Different types of therapy are available and effective for different concerns. For example, research suggests that cognitive-behavioral therapy can help improve symptoms related to stress, while narrative therapy can be particularly useful for grief and loss. It's ok to ask your potential therapist what approaches they might use to help you address your specific concerns.
- Therapy can be conducted with an individual, a couple in a relationship, several members of a family unit, or in a group setting.
- Alternative modalities to talk therapy are also available, such as art, music, or dance, or equine therapy.



Why go to therapy?

WHAT CAN THERAPY HELP YOU WITH?

- Therapy seeks to manage overwhelming emotions and destructive behaviors that can affect your daily functioning.
- Common reasons for therapy include: repeating negative patterns, depression, anxiety, addiction, and grief, to name a few.
- Therapists are trained to address relationship conflicts, sexual issues, intimacy struggles, and family conflicts.
- Some of the following signs and symptoms could indicate the need for therapy: anger eruptions, constant worry, sleeplessness, isolation, and loss of motivation or interest in activities that typically provide enjoyment.
- Therapists generally do not treat physical symptoms, nor are they usually licensed to prescribe medications. It is always best to seek advice from a medical practitioner if you are experiencing headaches, nausea, sleep concerns, appetite changes, and/or if you are interested in using medications to treat your challenges.

WHY NOT JUST TALK WITH FRIENDS AND FAMILY?

Safe Space for Healing:

Therapy offers a secure and confidential environment dedicated to your personal needs and recovery.

Professional Support:

Therapists provide unique advantages compared to confiding in friends or family due to their specialized training, research-based knowledge, and clinical expertise.

Objective Listening and Responses:

Therapists offer unbiased and non-judgmental listening and responses, distinct from the personal connections and potential biases of friends and family.

Focused Healing:

The therapeutic process is purposefully designed to facilitate your healing journey, guided by the therapist's clinical experience and expertise.

How to find and choose a therapist

LEARN HOW TO CHOOSE A THERAPIST, HOW THERAPY WORKS, QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR THERAPIST, AND MORE.

Ask for Recommendations:

- Consult trusted family members and friends.
- Ask your primary care physician, obstetrician/gynecologist, pediatrician, or another health professional.
- Seek referrals from your attorney if you're involved in legal matters.
- If your workplace has an employee assistance program, they may be able to assist you in finding a long-term therapist through your health plan.

Importance of Patience:

- Invest time, money, and effort in finding the right therapist for you.
- Try out at least 2-3 therapists to see who you feel most comfortable with.
 - You can start with an initial appointment or have a phone call with each therapist. You can ask for a free phone consultation before scheduling your first appointment.
- It's completely okay to switch therapists if you're not happy with your current one.
 - Exploring different therapists fosters a strong therapeutic relationship and promotes comfort in sharing your thoughts and emotions.
- Rushing the process might lead to choosing a therapist who may not have experience in dealing with your unique identity or concerns, hindering the progress of your therapy journey.

Community Mental Health Centers:

Contact your area community mental health center.

Educational Institutions:

Consult local universities or college psychology departments.

Psychological Associations:

Reach out to your local or state psychological or therapist associations for a list of practicing psychologists in your area.

Online Resources:

Search online via search engines to find therapist websites near you. Utilize a trusted online directory like APA's Psychologist Locator service.

- [Psychologist Locator](#): This service helps you search for therapists based on zip code and therapist's name.
- Check CAMFT's CounselingCalifornia.com: If you're in California, visit www.CounselingCalifornia.com. It's brought to you by CAMFT, the California Association for Marriage and Family Therapists, and includes therapists who are CAMFT members.
- Psychology Today's National List: For a national list of therapists, visit www.PsychologyToday.com. Therapists on this website pay for advertising on the platform, making it a comprehensive resource.



Therapy confidentiality

Confidentiality is a fundamental and paramount principle in the therapeutic relationship, and therapists are obligated to adhere to both ethical guidelines and legal regulations concerning client confidentiality. Therapists may be legally permitted and/or mandated to breach confidentiality under the following circumstances:

Immediate Danger to Self or Others: When a client explicitly communicates an imminent threat to themselves or others.

Child, Elder, or Dependent Adult Abuse or Neglect: In cases where the therapist believes that a child, elder, or dependent adult is being abused or neglected.

Court-Ordered Release: When a judge in a court of law issues a subpoena ordering the release of client information.



FIND A THERAPIST THAT YOU FEEL COMFORTABLE WITH

Trust-Building:

A great therapist establishes rapport, trust, and a safe environment for open discussions.

Open-Mindedness:

They maintain an open mind and are guided by your goals rather than imposing their own fixed views.

Inquisitive Nature:

They ask probing questions to delve into your thoughts and behaviors, fostering deeper exploration.

Accountability:

A good therapist holds you accountable for your actions and encourages self-accountability, facilitating personal growth.

Versatility:

They adapt their approach to meet your individual needs and are willing to try different methods to achieve therapeutic goals.

Self-Awareness:

A competent therapist possesses self-awareness, understanding their own biases and ensuring they don't negatively influence the therapeutic process.

Shared Values and Respect:

It's important to find a therapist who respects your identity, values, and beliefs. Shared values create a foundation of understanding and mutual respect essential for a productive therapeutic relationship.

Communication Style:

Consider the therapist's communication style and whether it aligns with your preferences.



Questions to ask a potential therapist

Practitioner Information:

- Are they accepting new patients?
- Since therapists are licensed by state, inquire if they are located in the same state where you reside.
- Does the therapist have experience working with or is a member of a group that is important to your identity, such as being queer-affirming or BIPOC-friendly?
- Do they specialize in working with people who present with similar issues or challenges that you are experiencing, such as depression, anxiety, relationship issues, substance abuse concerns, or other topics important to you?

Experience and Expertise:

- How many years have they been practicing?
- What are their areas of expertise?
- Do they have experience treating issues similar to yours?

Treatment Approach:

- What is their approach to treatment?
- Have their methods been proven effective for your specific concern?
- Do they conduct in-person and telehealth therapy?

Fees and Insurance:

- What are their fees for services?
- Do they offer a sliding-scale policy for affordability?
- Are they an in-network provider for your insurance, including Medicare, Medicaid, or other options?

Policies:

- Inquire about their policies for missed appointments and any other concerns important to you.

Can I afford therapy?

Using Insurance:

If you plan to use health insurance through your employer-sponsored program, make sure to select a provider within your plan's network. Otherwise, you may have to pay privately and see if your insurance company will reimburse a portion of the therapist's fees.

Employee Assistance Program:

If your workplace has an employee assistance program, you may be able to have no-cost, short-term and solution-focused counseling sessions. They may also assist you in finding a local provider who accepts your insurance.

Out-of-Pocket Payment:

Determine your co-pay and total out of pocket expenses and consider adding the fees in your financial budget plan.

What are the different types of therapy?

There are a variety of theories and approaches for therapy. Your provider will decide which is best based on their initial assessment. If you want to learn more about a specific approach, this list has links to explore. It offers many approaches, but is not exhaustive:

- [Cognitive-behavioral therapy \(CBT\)](#)
- [Humanistic therapy](#)
- [EMDR: eye movement desensitization and reprocessing](#)
- [Attachment-based](#)
- [Sex therapy](#)
- [Motivational intervening](#)
- [Couples counseling](#)
- [Person-centered](#)
- [Solution-focused](#)
- [Strength-based](#)
- [Mindfulness-based](#)
- [Trauma-informed](#)
- [Brief counseling for current issues](#)



What to expect from therapy

Pre-Appointment:

- Fill out an intake form consisting of your identifying information, demographics, health history, and questions about mental health and well-being, depression, anxiety, substance use, past therapy, hospitalizations, prescribed medications, and more. Read and sign the consent form and HIPAA Notice of Privacy.
- Inquire about in-person and telehealth (Zoom) sessions.
- Inquire about office hours and whether they fit with your schedule.

First Session:

- Review intake paperwork, assessment, consent form. Discuss and sign therapy policies and procedures.
- The initial consultation and assessment may be structured as a formal interview or free-flowing conversation.
- Discuss goals openly and feel free to share any concerns or dissatisfaction with your current or previous treatment plans.

Length and Frequency:

- One-to-one sessions usually last 45-50 minutes, whereas couples, family, and group sessions may vary in length of time.
- Frequency is typically once a week, but can be adjusted based on individual needs and the therapist's treatment plan.
- Duration of care varies from a few weeks for solution-focused counseling to years for psychoanalysis. The individual's progress also determines length of treatment.

After a Session:

- You may experience various emotions: relief, energy, exhaustion, frustration, upset, or overwhelm.
- If possible, allow some downtime after a session to rest and reflect.

Expectations From Each Session:

- Comprehensive Assessment: Thorough questioning to understand contextual factors.
- Collaborative Goal Setting: Establish treatment goals together.
- Evidence-Based Treatment: Dialogue and guided questioning following evidence-based protocols.



Reasons to Stop Treatment With a Therapist (Termination)

- Some clients may need specialized treatments or higher levels of care.
- You and your therapist may determine that you have achieved your goals or you are ready to pause or stop therapy for a while.
- It is the therapist's responsibility to determine their ability to help before and during counseling. If they do not possess the required training or experience to help you with your specific concerns, they have an ethical obligation to opt out of providing therapy and provide referrals to other therapists who may have the necessary expertise.
- Dual relationships (e.g., if a therapist is related to a client due to hereditary, marriage, work positions, social/community positions) and other personal reasons (e.g., retirement, illness) may lead to termination.
- If a therapist determines that termination of therapy is required, they are supposed to provide notice to you as soon as possible.
- Therapists may also choose to terminate if a client refuses to pay the required fee after several resolution attempts have been made.

Appendix and resources

USC SPECIFIC RESOURCES

COUNSELING AT USC

USC WorkWell Center

Provides up to five sessions of confidential, brief, solution-focused counseling for personal and work-related concerns offered by licensed clinicians. Sessions are available at no cost to USC-benefitted faculty and staff. WorkWell assists employees navigating health plans for long-term therapy. Managers and HR Partners can also call for a consultation on how to refer an employee.

Call 213-821-0800 from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., email workwell@usc.edu or fill out the contact page at <https://workwell.usc.edu/contact/>.

LifeWorks

Provides up to five free sessions of confidential counseling and after-hours crisis hotline. Their website also offers self-service, digital resources, and it is updated frequently.

Connect to LifeWorks by visiting usc.lifeworks.com and enter username “USC” and password “workwell”, download the “LifeWorks” app on [Apple App Store](#) or [Google Play](#), or call LifeWorks, toll-free, 24/7 at 855-399-7353.

Telebehavioral Health Clinic

USC Telehealth Clinic and Trauma Center via USC Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work provides free services to all.

USC Psychology Service Center

Provides research-based, reduced-fee therapy to members of the USC community. The USC Dornsife Psychology Services Center (PSC) is committed to providing cutting-edge, empirically supported therapy and assessment to the community and offers counseling for \$20 a session and group support for \$5 a session. They have three interrelated aims:

1. To provide high quality training for doctoral students in the clinical science program of the [Department of Psychology at USC](#).
2. To provide high quality and affordable services to individuals in the Los Angeles area.
3. To support research which enhances our understanding of, and treatments for, psychological issues.

USC HEALTH PLAN RESOURCES

USC PPO, EPO and EPO Plus Plan members

Provides 25 free sessions each for members and their dependents with [Lyra Health](#). Access licensed clinical therapists and mental health coaches by visiting usc.lyrahealth.com, emailing care@lyrahealth.com, or calling 844-495-7094.

For questions on medical and mental health provider options, or how to determine potential costs, contact USC Health Plans at 213-740-0035 or email healthplans@usc.edu.

Anthem HMO Plan members

Provides counseling and crisis management through Anthem’s [Employee Assistance Program](#). For more information call 800-999-7222 or go to anthemEAP.com and enter your company code: Anthem California.

Visit Anthem’s [health guide](#) for additional information or finding care.

Kaiser HMO Plan members

Provides [mental health and wellness support](#). For 24/7 crisis intervention and urgent mental health advice, please call Behavioral Health Care Helpline: 1-800-900-3277 (TTY 711). For concerns about mental health or substance use services, call 1-800-390-3503.

Get 24/7 emotional support with the [Headspace Care app](#) or call for a [mental health appointment](#).

OTHER CAMPUS RESOURCES

- [Keck Medicine of USC Care for the Caregiver](#)
- [USC Campus Support & Intervention](#)
- [USC Office of the Ombuds](#)
- [Office of Religious and Spiritual Life](#)
- [Mindful USC](#)

SUICIDE HELP/RESOURCES:

- <https://www.metanoia.org/suicide/>
- <https://save.org/>
- <https://afsp.org/>

Guides to aid your therapy search

The process of finding a therapist can take some time. Utilizing these tools (tracking sheet, preparation sheet, post-session reflections) may help to identify the right fit, called therapeutic alliance.

Therapist Tracking Sheet

Therapist's name	
Phone number	
Website	
Email address	
Are they an in-network provider for your insurance?	
Cost of session out of pocket	
How soon is the next available appointment?	
Do they have expertise working with your concern?	
To the extent possible, was it easy and comfortable sharing with the therapist?	

Prepare For Your First Session

Your first session, sometimes called an intake or assessment, will be very different from your subsequent sessions. The therapist asks a variety of questions to learn about you, what prompted you to seek therapy, and any associated symptoms that are problems for you. You may feel nervous, excited, hesitant. You can tell your therapist that you are uncomfortable sharing about certain topics in the first session. Keep in mind, the more you are willing to share about yourself, the more complete information the therapist can use to support you. These questions will help you to prepare for the first session.

What are the main issues that are guiding you to seek therapy right now? How long have these issues been going on?

How do you think therapy can be helpful? What are your goals for participating in therapy and how will you know that you've reached them?

Are there questions you didn't get a chance to ask on the phone? List them here.

Post Session Reflections

You're likely to feel a range of emotions after your first session. You may feel relieved or vulnerable, and maybe even a little overly-exposed. All these reactions are completely normal. Soon after your first session, try answering the questions below to reflect. They may help you to continue getting the most out of your sessions. You may decide to share some of your thoughts in future sessions with your therapist.

How do you feel now that you've finished the first session? Did it feel comfortable to talk about your concerns with the therapist (understanding that it may take some time to open up)?

Are there things you wish you would have said and would like to discuss next session? List them here.

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Sources

- [Shopping for a therapist?](#)
- [Shopping For a Licensed Therapist?How](#)
- [To Shop For A Psychologist](#)
- [How to find a therapist who is right for you](#)
- [How to find a BIPOC therapist](#)
- [3 Tips for Finding a Therapist](#)
- [How to Find the Right Therapist](#)
- [A Therapist's Guide to Finding a Therapist](#)
- [You Don't Have to Feel Bad if Therapy Didn't Help You](#)
- [14 types of therapy](#)
- [Get the facts about psychotherapy](#)
- [Find a therapist](#)
- [Support resources for faculty and staff](#)
- [What Will Happen in my First Therapy Session](#)
- [How does therapy work? What to expect?](#)
- [Talking therapy and counseling](#)
- [What to Expect from Therapy: Your First Therapy Session](#)

This guide was brought to you by the [USC Healthy Campus Mental Health Subcommittee](#). To learn more or get involved, please contact Julie Chobdee at jchobdee@usc.edu.