

Psychoanalytic therapy

Psychoanalytic therapy is a form of in-depth talk therapy that aims to bring unconscious or deeply buried thoughts and feelings to the conscious mind so that repressed experiences and emotions, often from childhood, can be brought to the surface and examined. Working together, the therapist and client look at how these repressed early memories have affected the client's thinking, behaviour, and relationships in adulthood. Psychoanalytic therapy is a form of talking therapy based on the theories of Sigmund Freud. Considered one of the forefathers of psychology, Freud is the founder of psychoanalysis. The approach explores how the unconscious mind influences thoughts and behaviours, with the aim of offering insight and resolution to the person seeking therapy.

Psychoanalytic therapy typically looks at the client's experiences of early childhood, to see if any events have had particular impact on their life, or contributed in some way to current concerns. This form of therapy is considered a long-term choice, and sessions can continue for weeks, months or even years, depending on the depth of the concern being explored.

People with depression, emotional struggles, emotional trauma, neurotic behaviour patterns, self-destructive behaviour patterns, personality disorders, or ongoing relationship issues, may benefit from psychoanalytic therapy. One small study found that 77 percent of patients reported significant improvement in symptoms, interpersonal problems, quality of life, and well-being upon completing psychoanalytic therapy. At a one-year follow-up, 80 percent reportedly experienced improvements.

Woman in dreamscape with pocket watches Psychoanalysis was developed in the late nineteenth century both as a theory and a form of therapy. Based on the premise that unconscious conflicts form the root of psychological issues, psychoanalysis suggests symptoms can be reduced by bringing these conflicts into conscious awareness. The theory of psychoanalysis has been criticized and revised numerous times, but it remains one of the most influential approaches in the field of psychology.

History of psychoanalysis

Attempts to trace back the history of psychoanalysis invariably lead to one renowned figure—Sigmund Freud. Born in 1856, Freud was a distinguished neurologist whose practice exposed him to individuals with symptoms of a condition similar to somatization, which was called hysteria at the time. Influenced by the work of fellow neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot, Freud began experimenting with hypnosis in treating these individuals.

As Freud's interest in hypnosis deepened, he collaborated with Josef Breuer to develop a new form of treatment that centered around helping individuals recall memories of traumatic events that occurred near the time symptoms began. Both Freud and Breuer observed that when people accessed these memories under hypnosis and spoke freely about them, their symptoms diminished. In 1895, Freud and Breuer published *Studies on Hysteria*, in which they described several cases of individuals treated through psychoanalysis. This publication is widely regarded as the first contribution to psychoanalytic literature.

After encountering several problems with hypnosis, Freud later abandoned this method in favour of what he termed "free association." By asking individuals to speak freely about whatever came to mind and analysing these free associations, Freud found he could work his

way back to the root of the psychological issues he encountered by uncovering repressed memories. He coined the term “psychoanalysis” to describe his new approach to treatment and its theoretical underpinnings.

As time passed, Freud expanded and refined his theory. Although he maintained that sexual trauma affected mental health, he began viewing symptoms primarily as the result of unconscious conflict. In 1899, he published *The Interpretation of Dreams*, in which he described dreams as the result of this conflict. He theorized that dreams are unconscious attempts to work through conflicts or express desires too threatening to be allowed into awareness.

Benefits of Psychoanalytic Therapy

As with any approach to mental health treatment, psychoanalytic therapy can have its pluses and minuses. The degree to which these potential benefits and pitfalls influence the choice to use this approach depends on a variety of factors, including the individual's preferences and severity of symptoms. In the last few decades, there has been significant research validating this approach's benefits. The therapist offers an empathetic and non-judgmental environment where the client can feel safe in revealing feelings or actions that have led to stress and difficulties in his or her life.

Often, simply sharing these burdens in the context of a therapeutic relationship can be beneficial. Furthermore, it has been shown that this type of self-examination can lead to continued emotional growth over time.

Downsides to Psychoanalytic Therapy

As with all treatment methods, there are also potential downsides that should be considered. The financial costs associated with this treatment modality can be very high. Costs are often cited as the biggest downside of psychoanalytic therapy.

This type of therapy has critics who claim that psychoanalytic therapy is too time-consuming, expensive, and generally ineffective. Some, such as Noam Chomsky and Karl Popper, have suggested that psychoanalysis lacked scientific basis. Misconceptions of this type of treatment are often connected to some of the earlier, more classical Freudian applications of psychoanalytic treatment.

Conditions Treated by Psychoanalysis

Psychoanalysis may be used to treat a number of different psychological conditions, including:

- Obsessive-compulsive disorder
- Depression
- Psychosomatic disorders
- Phobias
- Anxiety
- Identity problems

- Emotion struggles or trauma
- Self-destructive behaviour
- Relationship issues
- Sexual problems

People who are likely to benefit from this form of therapy are often those who have been experiencing symptoms for some time. People might choose psychoanalytic therapy when they have long-term symptoms of anxiety, depressed mood, and behaviours that have a negative impact on functioning and enjoyment of life.

PSYCHOANALYTIC TECHNIQUES

The main goal of psychoanalytic therapy is to bring unconscious material into consciousness and enhance the functioning of the ego, helping the individual become less controlled by biological drives or demands of the superego. In traditional psychoanalysis, the therapist remains as anonymous as possible, engaging in very little self-disclosure, if any. Because the goal of psychoanalytic therapy is often to restructure personality rather than reduce symptoms, the process can last for several years. Traditional psychoanalytic methods have been modified by modern approaches, but the following techniques still form the core of this type of therapy.

Free Association

Free association is a practice in psychoanalytic therapy, in which a patient talks of whatever comes into their mind. This technique involves a therapist giving a word or idea, and the patient immediately responds with the first word that comes to mind. It is hoped that fragments of repressed memories will emerge in the course of free association, giving an insight into the unconscious mind. Free association may not prove useful if the client shows resistance, and is reluctant to say what he or she is thinking. On the other hand, the presence of resistance (e.g., an excessively long pause) often provides a strong clue that the client is getting close to some important repressed idea in his or her thinking, and that further probing by the therapist is called for. Freud reported that his free associating patients occasionally experienced such an emotionally intense and vivid memory that they almost relived the experience. This is like a "flashback" from a war or a rape experience. Such a stressful memory, so real it feels like it is happening again, is called an abreaction. If such a disturbing memory occurred in therapy or with a supportive friend and one felt better--relieved or cleansed--later, it would be called a catharsis. Frequently, these intensely emotional experiences provided Freud a valuable insight into the patient's problems.

Dream Analysis

According to Freud the analysis of dreams is "the royal road to the unconscious." He argued that the conscious mind is like a censor, but it is less vigilant when we are asleep. As a result, repressed ideas come to the surface - though what we remember may well have been altered during the dream process. As a result, we need to distinguish between the manifest content and the latent content of a dream. The former is what we actually remember. The latter is

what it really means. Freud believed that very often the real meaning of a dream had a sexual significance and in his theory of sexual symbolism he speculates on the underlying meaning of common dream themes.

Resistance Analysis: In psychoanalysis, resistance refers to unconscious attempts by individuals to prevent anxiety-provoking material from entering consciousness. Examples of resistance include refusing to speak during therapy or being habitually late for appointments. Although this resistance can obstruct the therapeutic process, it can also provide valuable insight into conflicts particularly troubling to the person in therapy. The therapist can assist with identifying and overcoming resistance to help people access and work through their unconscious conflicts.

Transference Analysis: In psychoanalysis, the therapist functions as a "blank screen," allowing individuals to transfer unconscious feelings that may have been directed toward a significant person in their past, like a parent, onto the analyst. Through this transference, the individual in therapy begins relating to the therapist in the same way they related to people in their past, re-experiencing repressed emotions associated with previous relationships. The analyst does not try to prevent transference from occurring but can interpret the meaning of these reactions to help the individual become more aware of how past relationships could influence how they function in the present.

Modern psychoanalysis

Man hypnotized on couch with multiple reflections While many people maintain a strong interest in psychoanalysis, the movement has slowed dramatically. In the United States, only a relatively small percentage of therapists engage in psychoanalysis as their primary mode of treatment, and it is rare to find a therapist who strictly adheres to classical psychoanalytic methods. Most analysts adopt contemporary approaches to psychoanalysis that have modified Freud's version in obvious ways. For example, brief, time-limited versions of psychoanalysis are becoming more popular, and the therapeutic relationship tends to be more interactive. Greater emphasis is also placed on how the ego functions as opposed to the id and on current problems rather than early childhood experiences. Although psychoanalysis has been overtaken in popularity by other approaches, such as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), it is still considered a valid form of treatment for most anxiety and personality issues.

Criticism of psychoanalysis

Freud's development of psychoanalysis laid the groundwork for many other forms of psychotherapy. Some of his early concepts, such as the unconscious, are still utilized across many different treatment approaches. Regardless, psychoanalysis remains one of the most controversial approaches to psychotherapy and has been heavily criticized over the years. Some significant criticisms are listed below.

- Freud maintained a narrow focus on innate biological drives as the primary motivating force behind human behaviour, failing to give adequate attention to factors such as free will, genetics, and the environment.
- Traditional psychoanalysis is an intensive form of therapy requiring significant investments of time and money. It would not be suitable for individuals preferring a brief, problem-focused approach to therapy, those with immediate needs, or those with limited funds.
- In traditional psychoanalysis, the therapist often remains detached and anonymous. While this may serve the purpose of transference, it creates a sense of aloofness which can be difficult for some people to accept.
- Psychoanalysis requires individuals to possess a sufficient measure of ego strength to engage in self-exploration and work through psychic conflicts. As a result, some say it would not be suitable for individuals experiencing psychotic disturbances or who lack this level of ego control.
- From a theoretical standpoint, many concepts in Freud's theory are unobservable or poorly defined, rendering them untestable. The result is a lack of solid empirical evidence to support the theory and method of psychoanalysis.